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March-April 2012 • Volume 56 Number 2

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The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, Inc.

March-April 2012 • Volume 56, Number 2

Fred D. Pfening III ————— Editor and Publisher

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. (signed by) Martha Roth Wells, 9/26/12.

The Covers

by Fred D. Pfening III

Modeled on the Nouveau Cirque in Paris, Frank Hall's Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival in 1894 was the first aquatic circus presented in America. Housed in a Chicago structure built to exhibit massive panoramas, it may have been the most elegant building in which a circus was ever presented in North America. Fireworks, fountains, daring riders and beautiful ladies made a great impression on audiences, filling Hall's pockets from October 1894 until competition from the Ringling Circus, playing the Windy City for the first time in April 1895, cut into his trade, and presumably led to the show's closing late that month. It re-opened under the management of Richard H. Dockrill, who was equestrian director for Hall during the 1894-1895 run, in October 1895, closing forever in December of that year.

The magnificent one-sheet upright lithograph on the cover provides a good overview of the Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival. Proprietor Hall bisects the title at top and the slogans along the sides—"The Greatest Success Ever Known in the History of Amusements," and "Guaranteed the Best Show in America"—reflect the modest show business rhetoric of the era. The eye is drawn to the poster's center where a scene from the Venetian

Water Carnival portion of the performance is highlighted. The left side of the bill emphasizes the show's liquid elements while the right side portrays traditional circus features, an equestrienne act, clowns and the usual bevy of well-formed beauties, the last included, one presumes, to get the attention of adult males. While the show included horse acts, no exotic animal displays were on the bill.

This poster's printer is obscure. On the lower left appears "National Chicago," the name and location of the lithograph company that produced the image. While the generic title "National" has been used by a number of printers over the years, in this case it appears to refer to the National Printing and Engraving Company of Chicago that produced theatrical posters in the 1890s, including at least two for the up and coming magician Harry Houdini. No other examples of the firm's circus work have been discovered. Jay Last's *The Color Explosion*, a comprehensive directory of North American lithographers, makes no mention of the business, confirmation of the company's obscurity. Poster used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

The back cover shows the front of an eight-page courier, measuring 10½" x 14", used by Ed Shipp for his winter circus about 1895. Unlike most couriers of the period

which were filled with line drawings, his booklet contained photographs of his show's performers. A talented equestrian, Shipp's riding career ended when he broke his leg while performing on Ringling Bros. Circus in 1895. He then went into management, being equestrian director on a number of large circuses during the next fifteen or so years. Starting around 1913 he and Roy Feltus formed a circus that annually toured Latin America.

Even before his accident he conducted his own indoor circus each winter in his hometown of Petersburg, Illinois. A photograph of Shipp's circus building appears in the article on the Royal English Circus. His courier advertised a good line up with especially good riding acts featuring Dallie Julian, Cecil Lowande and Shipp's wife Julia Lowande. Other performers included veteran Nettie Carroll on the high wire, Professor L. F. Sunlin with a trained bull, and Carrie Kemp on a rolling globe. The clowns included George Hartzel and Horace Webb, both of whom continued in the business for decades.

The courier was printed by the Walker Lithographing and Printing Company of Erie, Pennsylvania, another printer not associated with circus art. The Walker Company later became part of the well-known Erie Lithograph Company. Original in Pfening Archives. *BW*

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Julie Cunningham #4774
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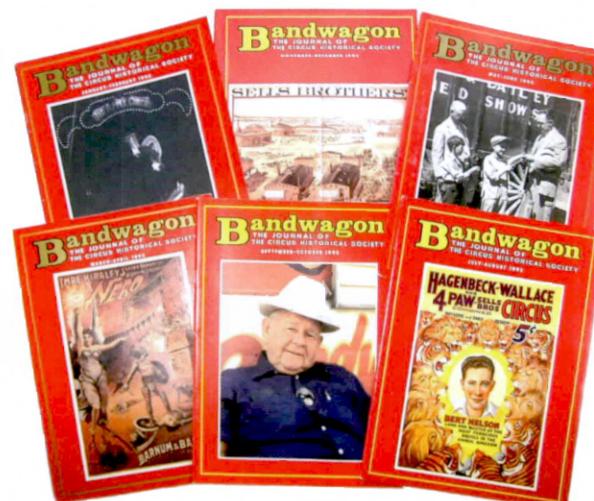
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In 1992 *Bandwagon* published articles on Lucio Cristiani, Gunther Gebel-Williams, the Christy Bros. Circus, Hoxie Tucker, the Cooper & Bailey Circus, Lucky Bill, African elephants, menageries, a review of the 1991 circus season, and many other subjects.



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Stuart Thayer, Joe Bradbury, Gordon Carver, Fred Pfening III, A. H. Saxon, Jerry Digney, Chang Reynolds, Mark St. Leon, John Polacsek, and Orin King were among the authors.

A complete listing of articles and authors can be found in the *Bandwagon* index on the CHS website.

Paris on the Prairie: An 1894 Nouveau Cirque in Chicago

by Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

A version of this paper was read at the 2010 Circus Historical Society convention in Normal, Illinois.



Introduction

Frank Hall's Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival was the nexus of Europe's commitment to the artistry of the primal one-ring, indoor circus and Chicago's position as the Great West's de facto financial and commercial gateway to the northeastern United States and the Old World. These two elements intersected in the winter of 1894, giving rise to one of the most unusual circus operations in North American circus history.

Cloned from a novel Parisian enterprise, the Nouveau Cirque of 1886, Hall's dual operation, a combination circus and water spectacle, was the first ever in the new world. It occupied a former panorama building that had been erected in anticipation of receiving the crowds attending the 1893 Chicago world's fair. Designed by the famed American architect John Merven Carrere, it thereby had a cache equaled by few ring performance structures in the United States. Hall continued as the manager when circus veteran Richard H. Dockrill produced another winter circus attraction in the venue during the winter of 1895.

The following narrative establishes a context for Hall's unique venture and details the success he enjoyed, as well as the ultimate failure of the enterprise under Dockrill's leadership. It is also an opportunity for associated topics seldom mentioned in field show history to be presented for consideration.

American Circus Origin and Development

The modern circus was originated in England in 1770 by Philip Astley, who staged the performance inside a protective structure. Astley trained a rider named Charles Hughes, who in turn instructed a Scotsman, John Bill Ricketts, inside his own building. On April 4, 1793, Ricketts staged what is now considered the first circus in North America, housed in a temporary amphitheater in the heart of Philadelphia. His equestrian turns, augmented with

ground and aerial performance artistry, were a welcome alternative to the usual indoor entertainment, the theater. In time, the two forms of diversion would often spell one another to provide variety for the audience and the reviewer's pen.

American circuses maintained an exclusively indoor identity through 1825, when the "pavilion," a canvas tent, was introduced by J. Purdy Brown (1802?-1834) and his partner Lewis Bailey (1795-1870). Over the next decade it was embraced by other showmen, imbuing the itinerant circus with a daily regimen and external character entirely different from the building shows. The change revolutionized the American circus, opening the hinterlands as new territory, shows constantly trailing the population as widespread settlement took place. Though indoor shows continue through today, the construction of temporary wooden amphitheaters serving itinerant shows came to an end in 1836.

The "circus," as the entertainment itself came to be called in 1824, toured as an itinerant organization for a typical forty-week spring to fall outdoor route. Some troupes toured the South during winter. Circuses staged indoor winter operations in major cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis and New Orleans. They utilized theaters and other pre-existing venues with obstruction-free roof spans that could house a ring or performance area on an elevated stage or on floor space adjacent to it.

Upper Midwestern Midwinter Circuses

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Midwestern metropolitan populations had grown to the extent that wintry northern communities had indoor ring shows within their midst. With communities of modest size hosting a winter circus, surely major cities with greater population could have provided viable opportunities for a properly conceived and executed business plan.

Modestly-sized Petersburg, Illinois had a winter time outfit, staged by former Ringling performer Edward Shipp (1864-1945). His efforts commenced with the construction of a practice barn in December 1883, followed by his inauguration of a winter circus in autumn 1887. He continued it annually, with the exception of two winters spent in Mexico. Shipp's experience served him well as the equestrian director for the 1894 Midwinter Circus in Milwaukee. The Winter Circus, as he termed his brand, also did dates in Peoria,

Edward Shipp's winter circus in Petersburg, Illinois, shown here in 1897 or 1898, is the best known rural show of the type, owing to this well-known photograph. Circus World Museum collection.



Illinois in 1907. Shipp retained his barn until selling it to the Kelly Bros., who operated it from 1908 to 1913.¹

J. H. LaPearl (1861-1936), a one-time circus acrobat and aerialist, staged public presentations in his winter quarters at Danville, Illinois and embarked on a winter circus operation in 1893.² The third edition was presented in early 1895. LaPearl simply took a practice barn, cut a hole in the loft and installed a gallery where ticket buyers could gaze downward on the activities within a 35-foot circus ring.³

For his second attempt as a circus impresario, Lawrence J. Rodriguez, aka L. J. Rodicue, gathered together a group of investors including the colorful mayor of Milwaukee, David S. Rose. In late 1894 they inaugurated The Midwinter Circus, one of the few ring efforts that incorporated the name of the season in the circus title. The lack of success enjoyed by the Music Hall in Milwaukee's big Exposition Building enabled Rodicue and others to rent the interior space at a rate of \$1000 for the month. To provide a summer feeling in the midst of the harsh Wisconsin winter, the organizers proceeded to erect an entire traveling circus outfit inside the space, complete with the usual canvas pavilion and stringer and plank seating. The crude facility surely didn't endear it to the theater-going crowd expected to patronize the effort. The opener was a full house, but interest waned through the holidays and it closed after an eight week season on January 6, 1895. A tent circus staged inside in wintertime, through the Christmas holiday, just didn't click with Cream City residents.⁴

Indoor Openers by Tent Shows

Tent circuses of the largest size established a tradition of staging an extended indoor date before commencing the outdoor tour under canvas. The events enabled them to gain revenue before the weather broke and facilitated outdoor operations. The practice originated with astute traveling menagerie owners recognizing that their beasts ate whether they were on exhibit or not, giving rise to their display indoors during cold Northern winters in cities like New York.

Beyond being an alternative to the theater productions, the spring openers were one means by which a circus established a geographic affiliation. The Barnum show commenced to do so in 1872, opening inside the Empire Rink in Manhattan. In 1873 it made a debut at the American Institute and continued playing a variety of indoor venues until 1881, when it made the first of many annual openers at Madison Square Garden, thereby cementing an identity with the city and that facility. "Barnum's" became their city's circus; the "Garden" was the place. With the exception of 1898 to 1902, and 1909, the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth opening was staged there every spring through 1918 and by the Combined Shows until the current facility bearing the legendary name was closed for rebuilding.

The Ringling Bros. commenced to establish their identity as Chicago's circus with an indoor presence at Tattersall's horse pavilion in Chicago in 1895, moving to the Coliseum in 1901. They subsequently made a debut in the Windy City every year through 1918, with the exceptions of: 1898 (St. Louis Coliseum); 1900 (under canvas in Wheeling, West Virginia); and 1909, when with a notable lack of financial success in both cities they swapped opening venues with the Barnum show.

Many other examples can be cited of indoor openers: Cooper & Bailey in Lexington, Kentucky; Adam Forepaugh in Philadelphia; and Campbell Bros. in Kansas City, among just a few. The bottom

line is that the American traveling circus has had a long tradition of indoor appearances, which yielded substantial revenues for show coffers before the higher daily expenses of the road hit their books.

This big show activity was supplemented to a vast extent by fraternally sponsored circuses, starting with the Moslem Shrine Temple date in Detroit in 1906. This format proliferated, providing funding for local temple operations while giving entertainment during cold northern winters. In time, the success of these wintertime indoor shows, usually involving performers who appeared under canvas during the summer, caused some tent show proprietors to bar their operatives from participation.

Despite the enjoyment of these wintry diversions, I can recall members of my own family, when discussing the topic in the early 1960s, saying that the Shrine show in the Milwaukee Arena wasn't a real circus. Their ideal was fixated on the tent circus, the one reaching with billowing white peaks towards blue skies from green acreage. It was a perception that had originated in the nineteenth century, perpetuated by traveling showmen.

The Study of Indoor Circuses

Regardless of the great importance of the indoor business, financially and artistically, the unique outdoor logistics of the traveling circus have attracted the great majority of researchers and writers for a variety of reasons. Even our late, lamented friend and authority on the formative period of the American circus, Stuart Thayer, did not seriously attempt to chronicle anything but the field shows after 1825. His incomparable *Annals of the American Circus, 1793-1860* must be supplemented by locally-focused works, such as George C. D. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* and Matthew Wittman's *Circus and the City, New York 1793-2010* to gain a more complete picture of the indoor circus in New York City.

The pertinent question is: "Why the bias?" We would offer two explanations. Clearly, the tent circus embodied and reflected more of the American character than the indoor shows owing to our unique internal development, demographics, geography, weather and culture. It generated an entirely new and different set of business practices, logistics and physical presence that is little less than awesome and bewildering in its variety and extent of development. It became an institution with specific American characteristics that separate it from the British-originated indoor circus, much of it evolving out of the 1825 implementation of the pavilion.⁵

The second explanation relates to the materials for analysis. Study of the indoor circus is comprised largely of the performance, the artists, their wardrobe, engagement venue and duration, and proprietorships. The purpose-built, temporary structures occupied between 1793 and 1836 were seldom described in detail and few accurate images exist. In addition, the sundry permanent structures built for other purposes, mostly stage plays, and adapted to house periodic ring shows, aren't part of the mainstream of circus development, being part of theater and local architectural history. The traveling shows broader American characteristics beckon the circus historian, while the theater researchers have treated the circus, somewhat correctly, as an interlude.

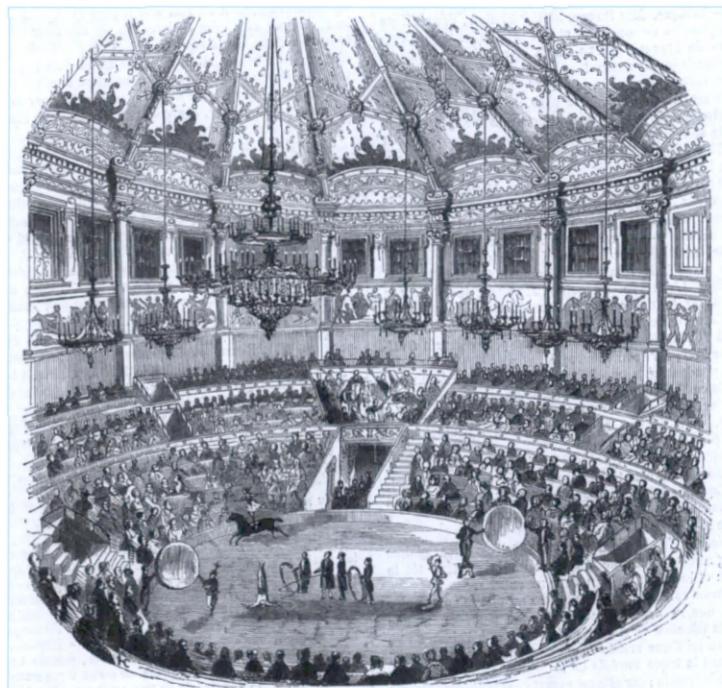
For the first four decades of the American indoor circus there's a paucity of documentation, little in the way of business or personal papers; limited memoirs; few bills and prints; obviously no photography; and no lexicon for the description of the ring activity. Local city newspapers, which serve as the primary continuum and reference source, add little to the comprehension of the why

and wherefore of the troupes, generally providing not much beyond troupe members and confirmation of their presence as an alternative entertainment to the stage productions. The circus garnered meaningful comment but infrequently, and with a lower level of detail by highbrow entertainment reviewers.

The resources pale beside the records for the touring outfits, for which records survive in greater quantity. The local scribes in a thousand penny press operations in the hinterlands took it upon themselves to describe in detail the tent shows and their transforming impact upon the community. The body of research material generated by daily moving outfits was obviously larger, given that the route of the circus gave it six opportunities for being reviewed each week, in as many communities.

Contrasting U. S. and European Operations

The American overland circus and the city of tents that it erected on a daily basis literally followed the advancing edge of the frontier



The great circus buildings of Europe, such as Cirque-Napoleon shown here, were palaces for the people, not equaled in America until motion picture palaces were constructed starting in the 1910s. Circus World Museum collection.

to its oblivion. After mastering the continent the circus continued to grow in splendor and to unprecedented size, to exceed anything seen in Europe. The singular exception to this advancement is the great circus buildings of Europe, which have no broad equivalent in North America, and the exceptionally high quality one-ring performances that they presented. It should be remembered that the European circus maintained a building-based existence and identity until an American showman brought the circus tent concept to England in 1842, with the subsequent spread to the continent.

Therein is partial explanation of why the circus thrives as an art form in Europe, but entered a decline in the United States shortly after the onset of the twentieth century that has never been reversed. The European circus thrived in one-ring format, embracing "art" over audience capacity. The American circus, to accommodate entertainment-starved Americans, chose to retain

the single day stand as a basis of operations and thereby went to two rings in 1873 and three in 1881 and thereafter to incorporate as many as nine performing venues under a single big top (three rings, four stages, the hippodrome track and the air). Capital investment fueled the enterprise, enabling expansion, justified on the basis that a new community nearly every day provided better possibility of higher revenue than a smaller show doing extended stands in one city. Solo perfection of the performing arts with recognition of individual achievement was compromised when one artist simultaneously staged his best against two or more others, thereby blurring the lines of personal distinction.

The end result was a sort of generic ring entertainment, with fewer artists achieving enduring name-recognition stardom. Notable ring occupants bucked the trend almost immediately. Robert T. Stickney (1846-1928) went so far as to organize a one-ring railroad outfit in 1884, his Imperial Circus, in objection to the trend toward ever larger tent shows. Bad weather and other difficulties incurred in trying to prove his point cost him his entire fortune of \$100,000.⁶

Once America's most highly compensated ring star, clown Dan Rice (1823-1900) yearned for the return of the one-ring circus. He expressed his desire in a piece composed shortly after the death of clown Charley White in January 1891.⁷

An outsider to the circus trade, Dr. C. D. Gray, general manager of the International Exposition Company, proposed an indoor tour of one-ring outfits at the turn of the century. His vision was fulfilled in just a few years, with the origination of the fraternally-sponsored winter circus at Detroit in 1906.⁸ Writing in *Billboard*, he noted: "To prove the fact that the old-fashioned one-ring circus has remained dear in the hearts of the people, many of them have made reasonable fortunes every year in different parts of America, and in many parts of the country they are preferred to the big shows.

"They furnish employment to many people, and give wonderful performances, many of them, at popular prices.

"The winter circus has been attempted many times in cities, with an effort to make it a permanent institution such as exists in a majority of the large cities of the Old World.

"In those countries the circus is so popular that special buildings are erected and are used for no other purpose but a perpetual circus season. Owing to the climactic conditions of this country, successful circuses have always performed under canvas, but within the past year or two many large auditoriums have been erected, with an eye to the giving of general shows, and by small and inexpensive alterations dressing-rooms for performers and stabling rooms for the horses have been built.

"Fraternal and social orders have increased in proportion to the population of the cities, and many of them, desiring to increase their charity funds, endeavor to combine amusement by doing so, and during the winter season they usually hold one or two events for this purpose. Among the many attractions and entertainments they organize in connection with their own local talent, the circus is the most popular of them."⁹

Embracing the tradition of family succession and a culture of performing art, Europeans retained the one-ring configuration long after Richard Sands introduced the pavilion to the British in 1842. Despite the growth shown by troupes owned by Americans like Jim Myers, and the mammoth Barnum and Bailey visit to Olympia in the winter of 1889 and the outdoor tour of 1898 to 1902, British showmen like George and John Sanger and those on the continent remained committed to the single ring format. A few experimented

with multiple ring operations, but the single ring remained the dominant European configuration.

Continuing their earlier indoor operations, European showmen established a tradition of permanent circus buildings in major cities, including Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, Madrid and Moscow. These purpose-built structures were substantial brick, stone and mortar facilities, designed by respected architects, as they would a theater. They were complete with remote stables, expansive dressing rooms, separate ticket and administrative offices, elaborate lobby facilities and other appurtenances. The interiors resembled the royal palaces and great halls of culture, lifting up the people as did the motion picture palaces of 1920s America. These permanent buildings, testimony to the engagement of the city in the art form, like the opera and theater, were the anchors, the loci, of the European circus network, bringing the ring arts into the heart of the capitals of Europe, with tent operations generally in the hinterlands.

It was for good reason that American proprietors trumpeted claims for their star performers as "first time in America" and "new from Europe" in their advertising and programs. The phrases carried with them a hallmark of excellence. It wasn't just an appeal to immigrants and their descendants populating the country; Europe had the right ferment for the advancement of the performing arts, rooted in the family circus tradition, where children learned early at the hand of their parents or a master. Some European artists would eventually be recruited for the American tent outfits, but many would not consider it. Some like the great Fredianis, who did on canting horseback what American acrobats did on the ground, tested American soil for a season or two and then returned home. The daily changing quality of the earthen rings diminished their artistry, an unacceptable compromising of their ring talent.¹⁰

Europeans continued to tweak the one-ring, indoor circus formula in their quest to maintain a viable engagement with city and hinterland dwellers so that their investments in the large, special purpose structures would remain viable, even though the performing season was a fraction of the year. Unfortunately, even the great circuses of Paris have not been able to stave off the changes in culture that have been witnessed in recent times. Few of the great structures have survived to our time and someday their grand dame ways may only be visible in two dimensional images and films like *Trapeze*.

Chicago's Destiny

Nineteenth century boosters openly declared that Chicago would excel above all western cities, especially the competing St. Louis, because of its manifest destiny. Despite being surrounded by swampy land and accessible alternately by mucky or dusty roads depending upon the season, it was the change from latitudinal to longitudinal-oriented transportation that enabled the city to outdistance other communities in the race for recognition, importance and greatness.¹¹

The crucial geographic position of the city on Lake Michigan, which led via water communication to the East Coast, initially caused Chicago to become the extension of the financial flow from Europe to the United States through New York City. Immigrants and funds came west, developing America to the point that mined raw materials and the overabundance of agricultural products could be sold and shipped elsewhere. The wheat from Midwest farms, their most valuable product, was transported east, first by wagon, then by railroad, the vectoring of most tracks pointing towards

Chicago regardless of their original point-to-point charters.

The proliferation of railroads, initially independent and only later aggregated into an interconnected network, made Chicago the hub of the nation's aggregation of lines before the Civil War. The American rail system resembled the internal veins of a Gingko tree leaf laid flat. The stem was a series of generally parallel trunk roads leading from major northeastern port cities to Chicago. The body was an array of lines that fanned out from the connecting point at Chicago, to the Pacific Northwest, California, the Southwest, Texas and Louisiana. The railroad superseded earlier water-based transport via the Great Lakes, the inland rivers, which typically flowed north to south, and man-made canals that connected nature's waterways.

The railroads laid the foundations of large business enterprise and capital formation, facilitated the industrial era and fostered the emergence of the United States as a world superpower. Chicago was where that sequence played out in its fullest form.

Chi-town's Heritage of Winter Circuses

As the structure utilized by Frank Hall to house his Royal English Circus was demolished in 1912, an anonymous columnist in *Billboard* characterized his conversion of the panorama as "the only ambitious attempt ever made to establish a permanent circus in Chicago."¹² That was hardly accurate. Chicago was no stranger to circuses in purpose-built structures, or to winter shows.

Chicago became a city on March 4, 1837, but the year before an overland circus braved the challenges to reach the community. Chicago theatrical history then commenced a series of advances measured by decade-long jumps across time.¹³

"The town was thrown into a fever of excitement" because the Grand Equestrian Arena, an eastern organization moving by boat on the Great Lakes, was advertised for an engagement starting on September 14, 1836.¹⁴ Proprietor Oscar Stone (1815-1846) erected his pavilion on the lot west of the New York House, the stable for which at the rear of the property also served to prepare the horses for their turn in the ring. Full houses were the rule; the tent was "crowded to suffocation every afternoon and evening."¹⁵ Two anacondas were displayed in Stone's ring, but the first menagerie



Levi North's circus building, thought to be the earliest documented in photography, was a large assembly hall with a minimum of interior decoration. Author's collection.

attached to a circus arrived the following year with J. N. Eldred's troupe.¹⁶

Into the 1850s, the most frequently leased lot for circus purposes was at the corner of Lake Street and Wabash Avenue.¹⁷ It is thought that this site was the location of a temporary structure that L. G.

Butler erected in November 1854, heated with stoves, to offer up the first, albeit abbreviated, winter season. It was the beginning of a long association between Chicago and the circus during blustery winters.¹⁸

The circus gained a more permanent home in Chicago in 1855 with the construction of the National Amphitheatre, located on Monroe Street, between Clark and South Wells (now Fifth Avenue). It was a joint venture between the accomplished veteran rider Levi J. North (1814-1885) and one Harry Turner. The enterprise opened on November 19, 1858. The wooden, two-story structure had a capacity of 2500 to 3062, which dwarfed the theaters in the city.¹⁹

The 90' by 206' building had dual stairways leading to upper boxes, 120 gas jets for lighting, integral stables and dressing rooms and was reported as costing \$90,000. By November 1856, a notable feature was the stage, apparently on wheels, which was rolled out of the way to reveal the circus ring.²⁰ North's success was limited and the circus facility closed in 1859. The structure returned to the control of the man who built it, someone named McAuly, later serving as a discharge station for Union soldiers and was torn down before 1871.²¹

Despite the on-going war to the south, Chicagoans still sought a mental respite in the middle of the conflict and from the harsh winters beside Lake Michigan. Frank J. Howes (1832-1880), in partnership with famed rider James Robinson (1835-1917), erected a winter circus in late 1863. Their New Amphitheatre was situated on a lot owned by Alexander White on Washington Street, across from the Court House. On November 25, the night before Thanksgiving, it opened with a cast that John Glenroy judged "about the strongest company that had ever exhibited at one time in the States. Its name it deserved viz: The Champion Circus." The bill verifies Glenroy's assessment, with a dozen arena stars of high caliber. It played through the winter to April 15, 1864, Robinson and Howes then taking another group on the road as a railroad show.²² Robinson and Howes reportedly came back together for a second winter season in Chicago.²³

James Robinson, accompanied by son Clarence, joined Fayette Lodawick "Yankee" Robinson (1818-1884), no relation, in another Chicago winter show. From late 1866 into 1867 they operated Yankee Robinson's Zoological Gardens and Coliseum, termed a "Circus House" in some advertising, at 106-114 State Street, at the corner of Washington. Yankee had acquired the former Melville circus from Jerry Mabie (1812-1867) and also had possession of animals belonging to John O'Brien. James Robinson was the headline talent.²⁴

The great Chicago fire of 1871 wiped out the city's core and caused an urban renewal the likes of which had never been witnessed in the United States. Circus man Seth B. Howes prospered as the result of the misfortune because his land records, secure in New York, had survived the fire and enabled him to commence rebuilding on his property while others battled to establish rights to their real estate.

The first indoor operation to come to our notice in post-fire Chicago was undertaken by James M. Nixon (1820-1899), another veteran circus entrepreneur. Nixon's Parisian Hippodrome and Chicago Amphitheatre rose on a lot between Washington and Randolph, on the west side of Clinton. The 2500-capacity edifice, described as a walled structure with a canvas top, opened on May 18, 1872. A varying bill of circus activity continued into July, with entirely different ring action provided by a Chiarini-titled troupe for much of August. Variety entertainments followed, with J. W.

Wilder & Co.'s National Circus taking residence in March 1873. Soon thereafter the once bright future of Nixon's Amphitheatre was extinguished by oblivion, which came in the form of the Panic of 1873.²⁵

Unlike most circus impresarios who secured a purpose-built structure for a Chicago winter engagement, Samuel Stickney Jr. (1845-1921) booked his troupe, Stickney & Co.'s New York Circus, into the Academy of Music. The structure, known as a minstrel and variety house the decade before, was on the south side of Washington Street, between Clark and Dearborn. It burned on February 5, 1878. The building should not be confused with a superior structure of the same name erected in 1871 on Halstead, between Madison and Monroe, and which former circus man Dan Shelby controlled from 1881 to about 1887.

The Stickney troupe opened on December 4, 1876 and ran only to the 16th, despite having announced an engagement to January 1. The initial reports stated that audiences were moderate, followed by light attendance. Part of the problem may have been the modest size of the elegant interior. John Barry was the featured rider on the bill, but he, three known clowns and other less notable kinkers were unable to sustain long term interest.²⁶

Samuel Stickney Jr. had a Chicago residence. He and others from the show took to the road with the William D. Curtis and George DeHaven-organized Great Roman Hippodrome that made a debut at Chicago on April 16, 1877.

If Frank Hall followed the actions of anyone locally, it may have been Thomas L. Grenier (c1846/1851-1932), an immigrant showman born in St. Ursule, Quebec, Canada. He is best known for having sold or traded an indoor temple of entertainment known as Grenier's Garden for the Janesville, Wisconsin based Burr Robbins circus before the 1888 summer season. It was operated by Grenier with his two brothers, Achilie and Henri. Grenier then sold some of the railroad equipment to the Ringlings and was later involved with W. C. Coup's ill-fated Rolling Palaces, essentially a unique dime museum on rails. Among his friends Grenier claimed Barnum, Forepaugh and John Ringling, the first of the brothers to relocate from Baraboo to a big city, Chicago, in the early 1890s.²⁷ Grenier was adequately prominent to have gained a portrait and cameo biography on the front page of the *Sporting and Theatrical Journal* of September 20, 1884. It profiled him as "one of the foremost managers of the West. He is made of the very proper material for a theatrical manager. He is a good loser, and abides his time when Fortune frowns, until it smiles again. We are pleased to note that the tide has turned in his favor, and after losing a fortune, the money seems to have found its way into his coffers again."

After years in seeking a fortune in different ways, he finally settled on making money operating a lodging house in Chicago. With capital accumulated, in 1879 Grenier took over a burlesque and vaudeville house in Chicago, the Lyceum Theater, which was reportedly a top family place on the West Side. It burned down during the season of 1883-1884, but was rebuilt and featured comic opera on stage.

Grenier became the proprietor of a Chicago winter circus in late 1883. This is the place that has been known for a long time as Grenier's Garden. It was at the intersection of West Madison and Throop Streets, a brick building measuring 140' by 300'. The talent, props and menagerie were all leased from Burr Robbins. Charles W. Fish, who went out on Robbins in 1884, was the top-billed rider in the program, which also included Samuel Stickney Jr., a former hurdle rider that an injury turned into a Shakespearean clown

and who was the owner of the 1877 winter show. A local reporter placed the Grenier's Garden venture into context: "... it is very comfortable, well heated, well lighted with electricity, having a fine entrance and commodious seats. The novelty of the enterprise is what surprises most people. There is in New York almost every winter an establishment of this kind. In Paris one finds the famous Cirque d'Hiver, and in Berlin and Dresden there are similar enterprises, but in the West there has never yet been seen a circus except under tents. This circus, however, has all the good features of a theatre, giving the performances of first rate jugglers, riders, clowns, equilibristas, as well as the conveniences of a play-house with the added attractions of a menagerie."²⁸

The circus experience was said to have cost Grenier \$16,000.²⁹ By 1887 the facility had been transformed into Grenier's Theater.³⁰

Discussions about having a world's fair in Chicago didn't commence until 1889, a year after Grenier and Robbins swapped their operations. Had the fair interests started earlier, we would be compelled to suggest that Robbins may have been in the vanguard of showmen who would foresee huge opportunity in entertaining the millions that would eventually visit the Windy City.

People came to the city on the lake not just to see the Great White City of the World's Columbian Exposition, but the city of Chicago. The summer long celebration, delayed until 1893, left no doubt about American enterprise. The millions of visitors who came to the fair, a healthy fraction of all Americans and multitudinous foreigners, brought tremendous disposable income into the city, supporting a proliferation in entertainment venues.³¹

Nate Salsbury had recognized the possibilities of the event and attempted to book Buffalo Bill's Wild West on the site. Failing to do so, he leased property adjacent to it, eventually yielding some of the greatest financial returns for any outdoor show enterprise in American history. Many other amusement entrepreneurs were also attracted by the glowing light on the lake and erected other temples of amusement.

The big shindig attracted the attention of veteran circus men. They were looking at the winter time with new eyes, just like later entrepreneurs would envision indoor water parks in the Wisconsin Dells as being viable, year-round family destinations whatever season or the weather. They were asking, "Why is the circus confined to the summer and the tent?" These aging entrepreneurs, still wanting to be part of the glamour and excitement of the ring shows, could have judged the summer season as already over-populated with too many circuses. Besides, with a permanent building circus, they could enjoy the activity while remaining cozily at home with family and friends, lionized in the community.

Circus visionaries seeing opportunity within the realm of the coming fair included William C. Coup (1836-1895). He was

toward the end of a career that included both great achievement and complete failure. Joining forces with James L. Hutchinson (1846-1910), a former partner in the Barnum show, and other prospective investors, they proposed an indoor circus for Chicago in late 1892. The published plan view of the facility incorporated a "Ring and Tank" as the central feature of their indoor show. The description clearly advances a scheme identical to that utilized in 1886 in the Nouveau Cirque in Paris. The structure, measuring 150' by 200', was projected to cost \$200,000.³² Owing to the onset of the Panic of 1893 the Coup-Hutchinson group was unable to find investors to place their plan into action. Nothing ever came of the proposal. It became simply another of the many ideas that flowed from the mind of an innovative showman.

Hutchinson also floated a plan for a permanent circus on Forty-Second Street in Manhattan. It was also based upon the Nouveau Cirque plan and it too failed to come to fruition. A committee of financiers and bluebloods sought \$600,000 for the project, which planned to retain Stanford White as the architect.³³

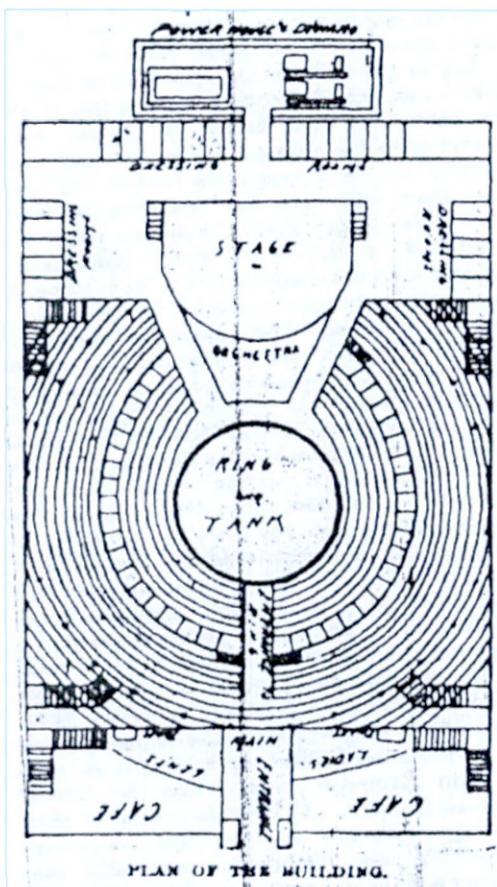
The abundant interest in providing alternative entertainments during the coming run of the fair sparked the erection of new buildings and the opening of multiple new amusement venues in the Windy City. The most ambitious of these, Steele MacKaye's unprecedented and grandiose Spectatorium, never reached fruition. It was a monumental undertaking, decades in advance of technically sophisticated audience experience productions that would populate theme parks in the late twentieth century.³⁴

The biggest name in the circus business to have floated a plan to establish a Paris-style winter circus in the United States, specifically in New York City, was James A. Bailey. His desire to do so was expressed in the mid-1890s, when he was attempting to gain control of Madison Square Garden.³⁵ By coincidence, there was a cadre of panorama talent in the Midwest, specifically in Chicago and Milwaukee, 90 miles to the north. It facilitated the capital, construction and installation of several panorama buildings and interiors in the city, all up and operating in time to enjoy patronage from fairgoers.³⁶ One of their

structures would serve to house Frank Hall's interpretation of Paris's Nouveau Cirque.

The New York and Chicago Panoramas

Panoramas were a well-known diversion in both Europe and the United States by the mid-nineteenth century, but few noteworthy structures to house them were designed and erected in North America until the latter half of the period. Among the first was the New York Colosseum at Broadway and 35th Street, which included P. T. Barnum as a stake-holder. Chicagoans first observed a modern style panorama when Paris by Night was displayed there



Before Frank Hall made it reality, other notable showmen including William C. Coup and James L. Hutchinson floated a proposal for a combination circus and water show. Author's collection.

in the summer of 1874, on loan from the Barnum enterprise. Other panorama structures followed in Philadelphia in 1876 and Boston in 1884.³⁷

The story line cuts here to John Merven Carrere, one of the giants in American architectural history. Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1858 to American parents, he went to school in Switzerland and was educated at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris between 1877 and 1882. There he met his future partner, Thomas Hastings, and upon his return to the United States focused his work on the construction of panorama buildings. He went to work at the famous firm of McKim, Mead and White as a draftsman, he and Hastings departing in 1885 to establish their own firm. Carrere & Hastings commissions

included: the Ponce de Leon and Alcazar Hotels in St. Augustine, Florida; the Mail and Express Building, numerous private residences and the New York Public Library's famous edifice at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street; the Paterson, New Jersey City Hall; fourteen Carnegie Libraries; halls at Yale and Cornell Universities; and many other structures of note. Carrere passed away in 1911 from injuries received in an automobile mishap.

Documentation more accurately confirming Carrere's specific

involvement with the Chicago structures is still being sought, but at the time of his untimely death in 1911 the *New York Times* reported "Mr. Carrere for a year devoted himself to the construction of the first permanent panoramas displayed in this country, which were erected in Chicago and this city [New York]."³⁸

A quartet of cyclorama buildings were erected in Chicago prior to the 1893 fair. The first housed the Battle of Gettysburg in



The natural wonders of Niagara Falls were represented inside the panorama structure that was adapted to house a unique circus and water show in 1894. Author's collection.

1883, designed by local architects Bauer & Hill and erected at the southwest corner of Wabash and Hubbard. In 1906 it became a vaudeville house.³⁹ Carrere, in consultation with local architects Jenney & Otis, designed the second, reposing across Wabash from the first, at the southeast corner of the same intersection. It housed The Siege of Paris and opened in 1884. The same team collaborated on a panorama at Michigan and Monroe, opening in 1885 with The Battle of Shiloh, followed a fourth elsewhere. Each of these structures housed a successive series of panoramas, followed by alternative service and ultimately demolition. None remain standing.

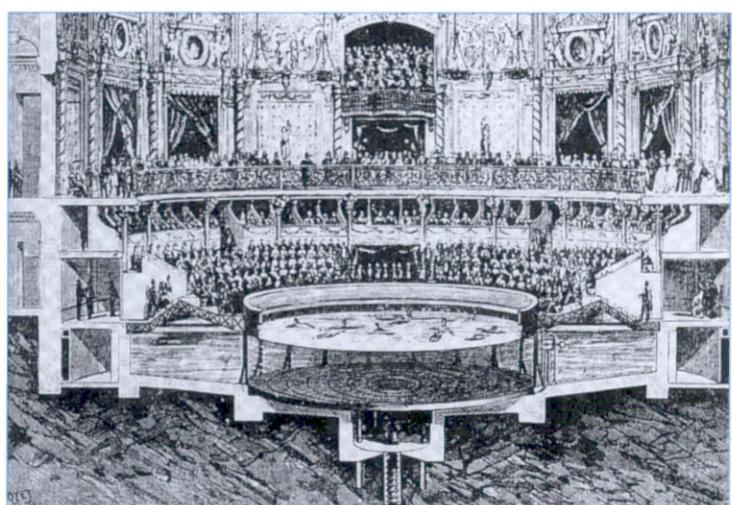
The second Chicago panorama is the one of interest to us. A painting of the Civil War battle at Mission Ridge replaced the Parisian scene in 1886, followed the next year by a representation of Jerusalem. In 1891 the wonders of Niagara Falls were portrayed to Chicagoans. No description of the facility has been discovered. It occurs to us that the watery attraction may have been outfitted with water pumps and other associated apparatus for the storage and pumping of large volumes of water.

Less than a decade after the great fair had made its run the appeal of the panoramas waned; their time had passed. The last to admit ticket holders did so in 1900. The third structure erected was the first to be demolished, already in 1899.

In 1894, the Paris panorama structure, then housing the water-laden Niagara Falls demonstration, awaited a new tenant. As happenstance would have it, the new attraction came in the form of a novel combination circus and water show, one that borrowed its concept from the Nouveau Cirque of Paris.

Nouveau Cirque

Paris was not only the French capital, but the "City of Light," a cultural milieu of extraordinary accomplishment that the remainder of the western world viewed as a leader in the arts. It should come as no surprise that an entirely new effort in the circus field was given the name Nouveau Cirque when it was inaugurated there in 1886.⁴⁰ Unlike the other well-established Parisian performing venues, Cirque d'Hiver and Cirque Medrano, this one truly projected the vitality of the age. The new circus facility presented a combined program of circus arts in the ring as well as in a large tank of water. Nothing like it had been seen before.



Paris had several permanent circus buildings, but the erection of the Nouveau Cirque in 1886 gave it the world's first combined circus and water show venue. Author's collection.

A French showman in need of a biographer, Joseph Oller (1839-1922), was the man behind the new enterprise. He was involved with numerous Parisian public attractions, including: a roller coaster, the Montagnes Russes (Russian Mountains, 1887), erected right in the heart of Paris; the Moulin Rouge cabaret (1889); and the Olympia music hall (1893). Oller was an outsider to both Paris and entertainments, but both sat up and took notice of his important innovations.⁴¹ French-born circus authority Dominique Jando, provided the author with this summary of Oller and the Nouveau Cirque. "I have never seen a biography of Joseph Oller, but his career is of course chronicled in many books. He was an entertainment entrepreneur—not a circus man—and a pioneer in many cases. The Nouveau Cirque was open November 26, 1881, closed April 18, 1926, demolished soon after, and an office building originally housing an insurance company was built in its place. Its originality was that its ring could be lowered and transformed into a swimming pool—for aquatic pantomimes, but also, in Oller's original concept, for swimmers in the afternoon, although that never worked. Oller left the Nouveau Cirque in 1888. The Nouveau Cirque technology was copied by other circuses, like the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris, which installed a pool in 1932 (and still working!), the Blackpool Tower Circus, and Circus Nikitin in Moscow (whose building is still extant, but has been transformed into a theater in the 1920s)."⁴²

Other circus-like enterprises have subsequently mixed earth, water and fire arts in elaborately choreographed presentations in our time, all of which can be traced to an origin in Oller's Nouveau Cirque.⁴³

Expatriate American author F. Berkeley Smith has provided us with a bit of insight about the new attraction and its peers, with a piece written in his 1903 volume *How Paris Amuses Itself*: "Parisians delight in the circus as much as we [Americans] do, but they are content in seeing one thing at a time and enjoying it.

"Here the cirques are as cozy as theaters and one small ring suffices. The Nouveau Cirque, whose façade on the rue St. Honoré resembles that of a music-hall, is the most comfortable of all the Parisian circuses, and, like Cirque d'Hiver and the Cirque Médrano, is open the year round. The patronage of the last two is more bourgeois than that of the first one, for both are situated in thickly populated quarters.

"The Médrano, on the boulevard Rochechouart in Montmartre, and the Cirque d'Hiver, on the boulevard du Temple, are patronized for the most part by the people of the rue du Temple and around la Place de la Bastille.

"An attractive feature of the Nouveau Cirque is the aquatic performance which concludes the show. The big ring mattress is suspended between two giant wheels and rolled away; the floor of the ring sinks slowly, and water rushes in until a safe diving depth is attained. Calcium lights are turned upon this improvised lake, and an aquatic burlesque follows. This naturally concludes the program, for every one taking part tumbles in as often as possible and retires dripping to his dressing room. One of these farce comedies ends in a wedding party where the bride and groom are ferried across in the little boat. The clown who acts as ferryman is invariably upset, and the wedding party have to kick out and swim for shore, on which they climb out or are hauled minus most of their clothes."⁴⁴

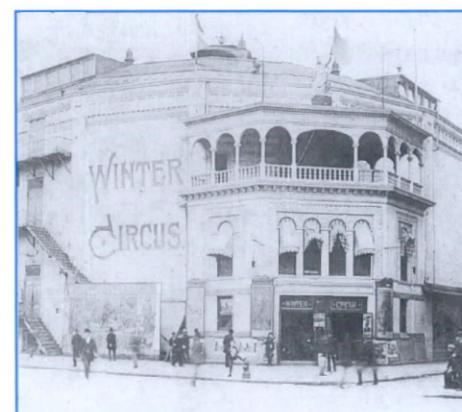
The carefree happiness of the Belle Époque played a major role in the choreographing of the aquatic presentations in the Nouveau Cirque. Within its walls performed artists like Footit and Chocolat, the incredible Fredianis, and many others who never crossed the

Atlantic Ocean to appear under a banner title of "first time in America." Like other European circus buildings, it temporarily housed customers in their own palace, aggrandized them like royalty, and made viewing the circus a wonderful experience. It was this essence that Frank Hall would try and convey across the ocean, from Paris to the prairie.

Panorama to Circus Conversions

Frank Hall wasn't the first showman to realize the possibility of adapting a defunct panorama structure to house a circus. The 1880 New York Circus operated by John H. Murray and Robert Stickney occupied the former 1878 Siege of Paris building in Boston. The ring was rationally placed in the middle of the round edifice, with the band seated on a stage. It opened on January 12 with a very strong cast of top name ring artists headed by Charles W. Fish.⁴⁵ The re-use lasted only a few weeks. Coincidentally, Fish later appeared with Hall's show.

A panorama structure was erected at Fifty-fifth Street and Seventh Avenue in New York City to house another Siege of Paris in 1882. It later served to present The Battle of Vicksburg, starting in 1886. The appeal of static views was limited because in the spring of 1890 the interior was cleared for another presentation. Prof. Oscar F. Gleason had a reputation for training horses that were considered a loss for domestic use. Starting on April 7, 1890, for a planned stay of eight weeks, he occupied the former panorama, presenting daily exhibitions of his skill in making horses amenable to human guidance. The structure had seating for 3000 spectators, plus thirty boxes, situated around a very large 90-foot diameter ring.⁴⁶ The most surprising aspect of this twelve-sided masonry structure was that it bore the title "Winter Circus" when occupied by Gleason's horse demonstrations. No explanation for the more expansive identity has been located.



In 1890 a panorama structure in New York City was modified to house a horse show presented by noted trainer Oscar F. Gleason. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

had opened in 1886.⁴⁸

Whether Hall had knowledge of these prior panorama to circus conversions is unknown, but being an informed manager would suggest that such news was within his base of knowledge. We'll give some credit to him for having recognized the possibility of transforming the specially-equipped panorama into a place capable of staging a water frolic—and a circus—within the same circle. Hall's vision to convert a Chicago facility into a dual circus and

water carnival palace was enhanced by water pumping facilities already in place.

Frank Hall

Little is known about Frank Hall's personal life or business career after his circus venture. At this time his birth, family and death remain unknowns. Two other men in the circus trade had the same name. Their existence and the shared commonness of his simple name make him a difficult guy to trace.⁴⁹ In general, Hall seems to have been an opportunist, riding the crest of each amusement craze as it came into favor.

Hall went into the roller skating business when it was a big

fad, presumably in the 1880s, securing control of twenty rinks and earning \$200,000. He retained them too long and lost everything when interests went elsewhere. Sometime thereafter Hall leased Haverly's Casino in Chicago and made it financially successful by changing the programming into a continuous operation.⁵⁰

His Casino-Eden Musee was at South Wabash Avenue and East Jackson Boulevard, just west of the Loop. It gained some fame for being the location where the popular tune *Sweet Nellie Bawn* was performed nightly by Willie Windom of

Frank Hall, founder and proprietor of the Royal English Circus, looked very much the Victorian era showman in this portrait. John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

Haverly's Minstrels.⁵¹ The rejuvenated casino enterprise probably served as the cash cow to bankroll Hall's novelty circus in late 1894.

Hall was also said to have converted a mirror maze into a barroom and planned to open his Bijou Theatre, a 31st Street vaudeville house, in 1894.⁵² In early 1895, as his circus was winding down, Hall signed leases to take over Pike's Opera House in Cincinnati and Havlin's in Chicago, which he planned to turn into Hall's Bargain Theatre. It was declared that "Hall is a hustler."⁵³

The Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival

The unbridled expansion of Chicago, constructed with abundant wooden structures erected too close together and rising faster than building codes could develop, explains in part the destruction suffered in the devastating fire in 1871. This catastrophe had the beneficial effect of causing the city to be largely rebuilt with better quality. It was essentially a second chance, accompanied by unequalled enthusiasm and ever-increasing pride for its future.

In less than two decades, having outstripped all other American metropolitan areas, it was determined to show itself to the world.

The means to do so was through celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America, whereby Chicago would display itself and thereby exemplify the achievements of American advancement. A new style circus was destined to become part of the milieu spawned in the wake of the big fair.

Knowing that Hall was tuned into all possibilities for staging entertainments, it's quite likely that he'd read of the Coup-Hutchinson proposal in the local newspapers or the *Clipper*. Applying his own insight, Hall presumably coupled the plan with knowledge of the availability of the panorama building. Modifying it to a suitable circus house, by removal of the panorama, retention of the water pumping physical plant, and installing the requisite seating and other appurtenances was a much less costly plan than had been put forth in 1892.

When Hall's plan for a Chicago winter circus was first made known in early 1894, it was announced that he was doing so inside the building housing the Jerusalem panorama.⁵⁴ The Holy City view had already been washed out by Niagara Falls for a couple seasons, but presumably the earlier occupancy was the one best known to the reporter and others.

Being an astute businessman, Hall organized the Royal English Syndicate Company to serve as the operating entity for his 1894 winter venture. Incorporation was a means to limit personal liability, a wise move since he had previously suffered substantial losses from the burning of his Lyceum Theater. The firm's letterhead suggested that \$220,000 had been invested in the venture. Later it was claimed that there was two million dollars behind the venture.⁵⁵ Orders of magnitude seemingly meant little when it came to publicity; "the more the better" reigned supreme in much circus hyperbole.

One of the great mysteries of the Hall enterprise to this writer is why the proprietor chose to aggrandize the English and the Germans when it was the French who had devised the plan upon which he based his novel presentation. There was a very strong Germanic immigrant presence in Chicago, far greater than that of French origin, but one doubts that local immigrants provided a large component of the circus audience. Exactly why Hall avoided



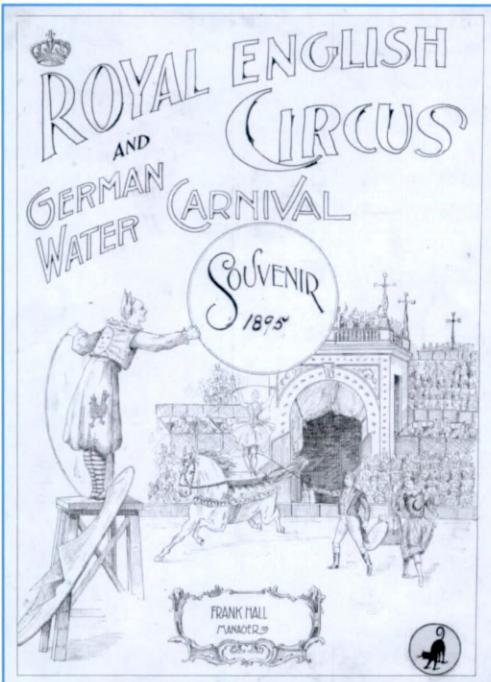
Chicagoans accustomed to seeing a circus under a sultry summer big top had a totally different experience when they headed into Frank Hall's Royal English Circus building in late 1894. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

giving any credit to the Parisians is unclear, but presumably there was some concern that it might have resulted in diminished ticket sales. Conceivably Hall desired that there be no comparison between his circus and the Parisian one that had inspired it.

Nearly eight months was required to turn Hall's plan of panorama to winter circus into reality. It was the most ambitious undertaking of the type initiated to that time. Actual construction appears to have consumed about two months.⁵⁶

An important aspect of the Hall circus appeal was its unique

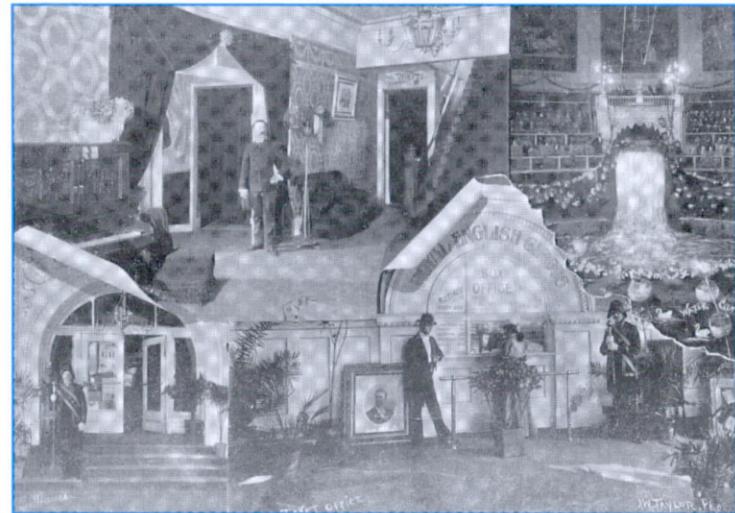
housing. Residents had never seen anything like it and Hall rightly stepped forward with an elaborately illustrated booklet that set aside any fears that it was a boondoggle: "The home of the Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival is replete with those things which make it a perfect establishment. The building at the corner of Hubbard Court and Wabash Avenue, formerly occupied by the Panorama of Jerusalem, affords all the advantages of



Sketch submitted for Royal English Circus program. It appears this concept was rejected. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

architectural arrangement and location for such an institution. It is within easy reach of all parts of the city and the handsome building has been remodeled and re-decorated throughout. The exterior has been painted white, the panels and brick walls being adorned with artistically executed equestrian scenes. An entrance twenty-five feet wide and forty-eight feet long, built of brick and staff, leads to the main structure from Wabash Avenue. This is surmounted by gorgeous stands of electric lights and flags of all nations. Ten commodious doors cut through the thirty-inch brick walls, each opening upon an iron stairway leading to the ground, furnish excellent and sufficient facilities for emptying the house in case of necessity, which can scarcely arise, as the building is as thoroughly fireproof as modern construction can make.

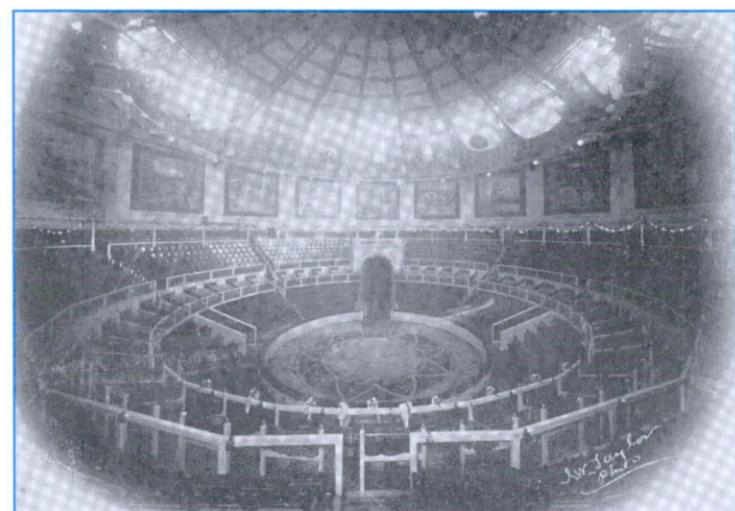
"The interior is artistic, with a diameter of one hundred and forty-two feet and cylindrical walls running eighty feet in the clear. The auditorium is airy, graceful, freely ventilated and heated by a complete system that permits of no disturbance of temperature by the most severe atmospheric unsettlement or inclemency of the weather. Wide foyers stretch on either side of the main entrance and the amphitheatre is reached by many doors and tunnels. Arranged in tiers, there are seats for twenty-two hundred people, with broad promenades encircling the entire auditorium at the back of the uppermost seats. The orchestra and arena seats ascend from the



A variety of internal alterations enhanced the interior of the former panorama structure, making it suitable for use as a winter circus. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

ring to the private boxes and above these are the lower priced seats. But there is little choice, as not an obstruction impairs the view. The acoustics are perfect and every seat is the best in the house. The flooring is covered with rich Wilton carpet of a warm red hue; there are forty arc lights, hundreds of incandescent lamps and gas jets for illuminating, and the colored calcium and electric lights, bright tints of the silken upholstery and draperies, the innumerable flags and magnificent ring costumes and decorations, make a harmonious and beautiful effect. For the benefit of the little ones, and bringing back fond memories to the older ones, are a number of frescoed scenes from "Mother Goose" and fairy tales on the interior walls.

"At first glance the arena is considered small, but this is due to the proximity of the seats and the concentrated view. But the ring is the



The lofty interior of the former panorama building gave it a magnificent ambiance, one that would have been well suited to thrilling aerial acts. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

regulation size, forty-two feet in diameter, and so arranged inside of two minutes it can be changed to a miniature lake. An immense rubber blanket is stretched over the sawdust and the water rushes in a torrent into the enclosure, forming a lake four feet deep and containing thirty thousand gallons. This is absolutely new to this

country, and the carnival, with its magnificent floats and attendant glories, forms a scene intoxicating to the senses and presents a picture sweetly bewildering. It is a testimony to artistic and mechanical achievements and affords unlimited enjoyment and entertainment.”⁵⁷

Toward the end of the Hall show run a published article provided a good description of the water system: “[The water] comes from a great steel tank outside the building, thirty-two feet above the rings, by reason of a sixteen inch pipe connection, and fills the area of the ring with steam-heated water in less than two minutes. A powerful pump, with a capacity for 1,000 gallons a minute, re-conveys the water from the ring to the tank after the performance. The water supply, it may be remarked, is frequently changed and freed from impurity. This is the original water circus in America, and is the latest novelty in the circus field.”⁵⁸

For an equestrian director, Hall hired an experienced veteran of ring shows, Irish-born Richard H. Dockrill (1843-1922). He and his star-level equestrienne wife, born Elise Kennebel (1852-1920, aka Rozelle E. Dockrill), toured England with the Howes show in 1870 and came back here with it for 1871. Subsequently they worked for Howes, James A. Bailey, the Barnum show, Walter L. Main and others before Richard ended his career in 1908 with Norris & Rowe. Dockrill was in his early fifties when he was hired to manage the troupe assembled by Hall. With his wife and daughter Rose in tow, they provided a substantial foundation for the circus Chicagoans would witness. Dockrill's assistant was the young Lew Graham (1862-1935), who went on to become a Ringling sideshow manager and Ringling-Barnum announcer for many years.

C. M. Courier was the initial bandleader, replaced no later than January 1895 by James S. Robinson, who had been with Barnum and Bailey. Jules Levy, one of the all-time great solo cornet players, was contracted to appear in April 1895.⁵⁹

Other Hall staffers given program listing status included: Maze Edwards, Hall's representative; John S. Flaherty, Assistant Manager; Mrs. Mabie C. Erlam-Hawthorne, Treasurer; De Sassier, Press Agent; Jake Rosenthal, Cashier; John LeClaire, Pantomime Director (England); C. H. Jacobsen, Maitre de Ballet (Vienna); F. R. Young, Head Usher; E. E. Rines, Electrician; E. W. Cooke, Master Mechanic (England); C. W. Fistler, Scenic Artist; William Rechmar, Master of Properties; and S. Frankenstein, Calcium [lighting] Effects. Suppliers noted were: Harrison & Co., Covent Garden, London, Costumiers; F. Wm. Harvey, Evening Dresses, Suits and Uniforms; and Boston Woven Hose Co., Rubber Costumes.⁶⁰

The fame of the Royal English show, and presumably the salaries paid for winter work by Hall, were sufficient to keep the ring filled with artists for the first two months. He didn't advertise for more stars until mid-January, desiring “Better Artists than Keith or Koster & Bial play,” also declaring “Salaries no object.” Those were words to warm every unemployed performer's heart in mid-winter.⁶¹

In addition to having household name acts, an important aspect of the bill at Hall's circus was the fact he changed it constantly, sometimes daily, enabled to do so by performers passing through Chicago on the railroads or venturing into the city seeking employment. The rapid but planned turnover was something unheard of with a traveling circus, which generally retained the same cast through a season, sometimes two. The changing slate was a characteristic of the permanent variety and vaudeville stage, and later the movie house. This constantly renewing program surely explains to some degree the staying power and success of Frank Hall's unique circus enterprise.

To some degree the changing slate had been enabled by the residual impact of the Panic in 1893. Jobs were still scarce and managers booking acts could drive a hard bargain, even for limited length engagements. It's clear that Hall was no pushover when it came to booking kinkers. Everyone was obligated to sign a lengthy contract that left little to chance. Part of the language was a listing of no less than 39 Rules and Regulations, the last one announcing “These rules will be strictly enforced.” Nearly all of them were accompanied by fines, charges for damages to property or threat of dismissal.

Other than applying for a position, those coming in the back door for a worker's engagement apparently could sign up on a posted sheet titled “Frank Hall's Pay Roll.” Under the heading was the statement “We the undersigned, for and in

Rules and Regulations of the Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival

1. The management shall not be held responsible to any employee or performer for any accident, act, or omission of any other employee or performer.

2. Each employee being fully aware of the danger appertaining to their profession, and receiving as compensation, therefor, extra high wages, and other valuable considerations, hereby assuming all risk, injury or debts arising from any cause to their person, animals, birds or any other property in fulfilling this engagement.

3. No employee or performer shall be entitled to receive any wages or salary during sickness, or while not performing, or not at work. In case any employee or performer from sickness, injury or other cause becomes unable or incapacitated from performing his or her specified duties, the management may, at their option, cancel and terminate their engagement.

4. Penalty, \$25 fine or dismissal. No games, gambling, stealing, fighting, drunkenness, or any improper or unlawful conduct will be tolerated. No matter when, where, or under what circumstances committed, under penalty of \$25 or immediate discharge, or both, at the option of the manager.

5. The performers are required to furnish all their own high-top boots, crushed opera hats and gloves, of first-class material and make, and of a uniform pattern to be approved by the equestrian director.

6. All performers are required to have the very best wardrobes throughout, in quantity and quality suitable for their special acts. This being the leading winter Circus of America, the artists must dress accordingly in the ring, and on the streets in a becoming manner.

7. Every performer must furnish all apparatus, animals, birds or other property necessary to give their special acts, keeping same in good condition, clean and in repair at their own personal expense and risk. Nor will the management be responsible for any loss, damage or other injury to such private property.

8. All performers and other employees are expected to make themselves generally useful, unless specially specified otherwise in their contract; holding objects, going in entrees, leaping, tumbling, assisting in other acts if necessary, pantomimes, groups, etc., as may be needed, without any extra compensation.

9. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS, for swearing, quarrelling, or loud boisterous language about the establishment, hotels or other places. Good behavior required at all times.

10. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS. All employees and other working men must conduct themselves in an orderly, quiet and gentlemanly manner, keeping clean, washing and combing themselves, clean shirt, and boots cleaned before entering the ring.

11. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS. No employee must leave their post of duty assigned them, without first getting permission from the proper person in charge of their department.

12. PENALTY, TWO TO FIVE DOLLARS. Every performer, musician or other employee must be at their respective posts of duty in their several departments, by or before opening of doors to the public, at every performance, which is liable to vary frequently.

13. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS. No performer, musician, or other employees will be allowed to absent himself from rehearsals, parades. This rule is imperative and must be obeyed promptly to the minute designated daily. Delays will be considered equivalent to absence, and penalty of Five Dollars to one week's salary will be imposed on each person delaying to play his part.

14. PENALTY, ONE TO FIVE DOLLARS. All performers, officers, musicians and other employees must wear uniforms or costumes, as may be designated.

15. All performers who go into ring are required to furnish kid gloves, high-top boots and crush opera hats of a uniform style, of a style to be approved by the management.

16. All grooms must have their horses for entries, parades, etc., etc., ready half an hour in advance of the time that the performers want them, and see that they are properly trapped and arranged for performers. Groomsmen must have all horses also in charge of wardrobe and properties, etc., ready in ample times, and in their proper places, and must keep clean and put away in their proper places, all trappings.

**Operated by the Royal English
Syndicate Company
Frank Hall, Manager.
Richard H. Dockrill, Equestrian Director.**

17. PENALTY, FULL VALUE. All employees will be held responsible to their full value for any wardrobe trappings lost, torn, sold or destroyed.

18. PENALTY, ONE TO FIVE DOLLARS. All grooms must assist in affixing and removing any trappings to the best of their ability, of such stock as they may have in charge.

19. PENALTY, ONE TO FIVE DOLLARS. Property men neglecting to have their properties ready as required, or causing any delay in the ring.

20. PENALTY, TWO TO FIVE DOLLARS. The boss property man must see to all his men, keeping their properties clean and neat, and in their proper places and in proper order.

21. PENALTY, FULL VALUE. Any member of the Company or employee losing (sic) or destroying any property belonging to the Company will be charged full value thereof. No excuses will be received, whether the property is in their charge or not.

22. PENALTY, FIVE DOLLARS. The Band must take their seats in the orchestra thirty minutes before each performance and be prepared and ready for the orchestra.

23. PENALTY, FIVE DOLLARS. No person will be allowed in or near the ring entrance or dressing rooms unless dressed for, or to take part in any performance allotted to them, without compensation.

24. PENALTY, FIVE TO TEN DOLLARS. Every performer must be in dressing room and dressed for the entry of first act, at least twenty minutes before the time of commencing the performance.

25. PENALTY, FIVE TO TEN DOLLARS. All performers, musicians and other employees must attend rehearsals when required to take part in any performance allotted to them, without compensation.

26. PENALTY, FIVE DOLLARS. Any member being late for entry or keeping the ring waiting.

27. PENALTY, FIVE DOLLARS. In leaping and tumbling, all must be in line, each and every performer taking his turn in rotation until the line is formed for the finish. A forfeiture of Five Dollars for every offence.

28. Every performer failing to exhibit himself to the best of his ability, leaving out tricks, any special acts, or neglecting or shirking their business, will be fined Five Dollars for each trick omitted, or each offence.

29. No person connected with the Company will be admitted to the rear entrance under any circumstances, any member, person or employee bringing a stranger into the ring or dressing rooms will forfeit Ten Dollars.

30. PENALTY, UP TO FIVE DOLLARS. No performer, musician or employee will be allowed to pass through the front door; all employees must pass through the stage door.

31. PENALTY, FIVE TO TEN DOLLARS, OR DISMISSAL. No performer or member of this Company will be allowed to appear before the audience in a slovenly manner, or go into the ring with soiled or dirty tights or wardrobe on. Performers must keep themselves neat and clean.

32. One day each week will be salary day; no money will be paid any employee, musician or other employee on any other day, no matter what circumstances or what trouble there may be.

33. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS. No performer, musician or other employee will be allowed to have or carry spirits or malt liquors of any character in the establishment.

34. Loud or boisterous talking positively prohibited in any part of the establishment.

35. PENALTY OF FIVE DOLLARS. All employees and other men are strictly enjoined from using alcohol, oil or any kind of cooking apparatus in the dressing rooms, or any part of the building, under the above penalty.

36. PENALTY, FIVE TO TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS. Swearing, boisterous or loud talking, or any unseemly behavior is strictly prohibited; this rule is intended particularly for the dressing rooms and property rooms, and will be strenuously enforced there and elsewhere.

37. PENALTY, FIVE TO TEN DOLLARS, OR DISMISSAL. Any member of this Company are (sic) forbidden to raffle or sell anything of any kind, name or nature, at the hotel or premises owned or controlled by the proprietors of this establishment.

38. Every performer will remain in the dressing room, in his performing dress, until the performance is over, or so far advanced, that the Equestrian Director will notify them that their services will not be required.

39. These rules will be strictly enforced.

consideration of the sum of One Dollar and other considerations, hereby sign our names in full of all demands of any name or nature whatever." The columns underneath were Name, Position, Amount, Days, Rate Per Day and Signature. Hard work and high turnover must have been the order of the day at the Royal English Circus.

The first half of Hall's presentation was the Royal English Circus. Many of these folks served as headliners on major tent circuses, with specially-commissioned lithographs depicting them accomplishing their acts. We cannot enumerate all of the many Hall performers, but we would be remiss not to mention: riders including William DeMott (with clown Al Caron), Rose Dockrill and John Cleveland, Charles W. Fish, Rosa Lee (with clown Chris. Green), Cecil Lowande with clown Ed Belmont, Julia Lowande also with Belmont, Rosie Meers and William O'Dale; Madam Marantette with her horses Evergreen, Filemaker and Jupiter; clown Billy Burke; aerialists La Mothe and Maynard; leaper Peter Bell; slack wire artist Emma Stickney; dog trainer Robert Stickney; numerous acrobats, including Bannock and Adair, Ena Bertoldi, the Akimoto Japanese Troupe, the de Comas and the Lars Larsen family; and the musical clowns, the Deltorelli brothers. To a degree it seems that Dockrill drew upon connections he'd established in his many years in the trade to fill the bill. They included people who may have appeared anonymously or under stage names to avoid detection by their primary employers. A number of the top artists enjoyed lengthy engagements, while others came and went, enabling Hall to advertise that the bill indeed changed weekly.

The second part of the Hall attraction was the German Water Carnival. At least one person has suggested that Hall's water displays may have inspired the Coney Island water frolics that were presented on Barnum and Bailey in 1895. One can also reflect upon the presence of Paul Boyton, paddling about in a flooded stage on the show in 1887. The principal presentation of the Hall water show in October was a comical farce, *The Fatal Wedding, or Tramps Abroad*. Simply put, it was a three-scene, theatrical comedy that ended up with everyone in the water. Clearly it reprised the similar frolic that had been staged at the Nouveau Cirque. Later in the run, by January 13, 1895 it was transformed into Venice in Chicago, utilizing elaborate floats, fountains and sprays, and electrical effects. The conversion was undertaken to eliminate what were judged to be dull and unentertaining aspects of the initial water production.⁶² As with all water shows, Hall's program bore a disclaimer: "NOTE—The Manager will not be Responsible for any Damage to Dress by the Splashing of Water."

We have found only one negative comment on Hall's show. An American flag protection group objected to a clown with the show wearing a suit that was derived from the Stars and Bars.⁶³ The American flag was then a revered and closely protected symbol.

A four-page program was printed in three colors. Incorporated in it was the usual advertising and the program of acts. Several versions of it exist, each with a different date, testimony to the constantly changing slate of performers.⁶⁴

In addition to the stellar and unique performance, the Royal English Circus was also gifted with its own grand entre march, *A Night at the Circus*, composed by W. G. Sired and published in 1894.⁶⁵

The Royal English Circus was originally slated to debut on October 6, but the event was pushed back a week when preparations were incomplete. Hall staged a press reception on October 11 and opened to the public two days later. Hall's press reps did a great job in securing substantial review coverage in Chicago papers and even in the national press. Initial feedback was heart-warming: "Frank Hall's circus, being the novelty, commanded the greatest

Everyone who performed for Hall signed off on an extended contract that included a multitude of behavior rules that were accompanied by fines, or dismissal. Transcribed from the Circus World Museum collection document.



Richard Dockrill, shown here on the Walter L. Main Circus in 1899, cut an imposing figure in the ring and had many connections among circus professionals that brought some of them to Chicago. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

of beautifying and making attractive a place sadly neglected before, and will no doubt receive both praise and patronage for his enterprise.⁶⁸ A month later, it was acknowledged that the novelty was wearing off a bit, but the water carnival was still drawing favorable comment.⁶⁹ It was the great quality of the performers, top shelf by any standard, which sustained the attendance, along with aggressive advertising in all mediums.⁷⁰ Hall took advantage of the holiday spirit by presenting a special Christmas program, characterized as being of "unusual merit."⁷¹

The 200th consecutive performance was marked on January 21, 1895, no mean achievement for a first-time winter operation. Chicago's notoriously blustery weather blasted business downward in early February, but it was felt that the merits of the show would revive frozen locals, and it did.⁷² The 300th show took place on March 10, 1895, and a week later an aerial ballet was announced as a coming attraction.⁷³

Hall finally decided that the show had run its course and announced closure for May 5.⁷⁴ The Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows had inaugurated a two-decade long existence as Chicago's spring indoor circus with their first engagement in the Windy City on April 6, 1895. The Baraboo brothers gave their debut a watery attraction by booking "Speedy, The Marvelous," who did a reported 80-foot dive from the truss work supporting the roof of Tattersall's into a pool of water on the arena floor.⁷⁵

The arrival of the three-ring outfit from Baraboo was surely a factor in Hall's decision to cease operation, yet despite the strong competition he continued to remain open for a month against the new-to-Chicago Ringlings.⁷⁶ Hall took special efforts to close out "with its good reputation unimpaired" by adding a living bronze statue act and a Russian ballet in the last week.⁷⁷ It was a strong finish to a great run. Testimony to the presumed success was the

attention. . . . Every seat in the roomy amphitheatre was filled matinee and night." "Latter day amusements have developed nothing that has caused such widespread comment and it seems to have won instant favor."⁶⁶ "Frank Hall's Royal English Circus began the second week of its usefulness with everything sold to the ring bank."⁶⁷

Compliments continued on a weekly basis. Hall had framed a winner. *The New York Clipper* observed, "Manager Hall has accomplished much in the way



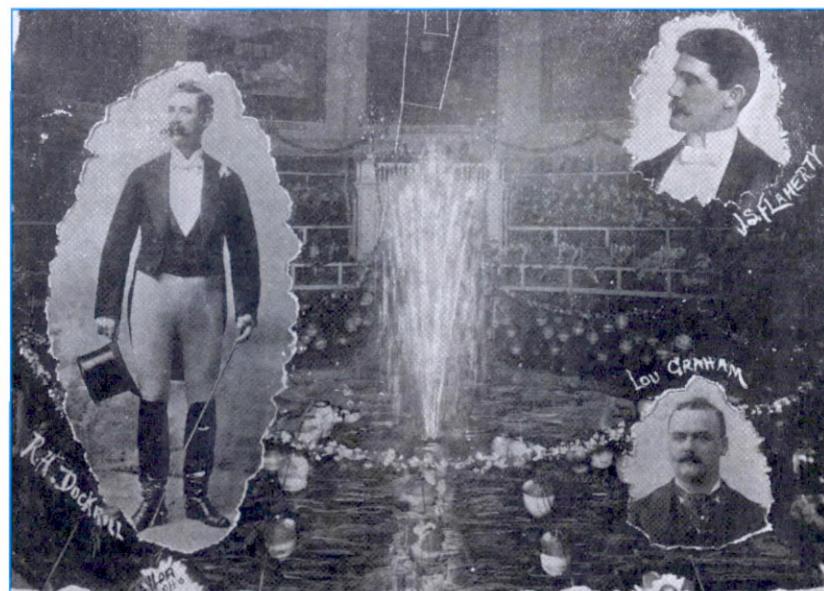
The Venetian Water Carnival was part of the aquatic performance. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

re-opening publicly forecast for October 12, 1895. The rebuilt panorama structure stood idle after the Hall show's conclusion.

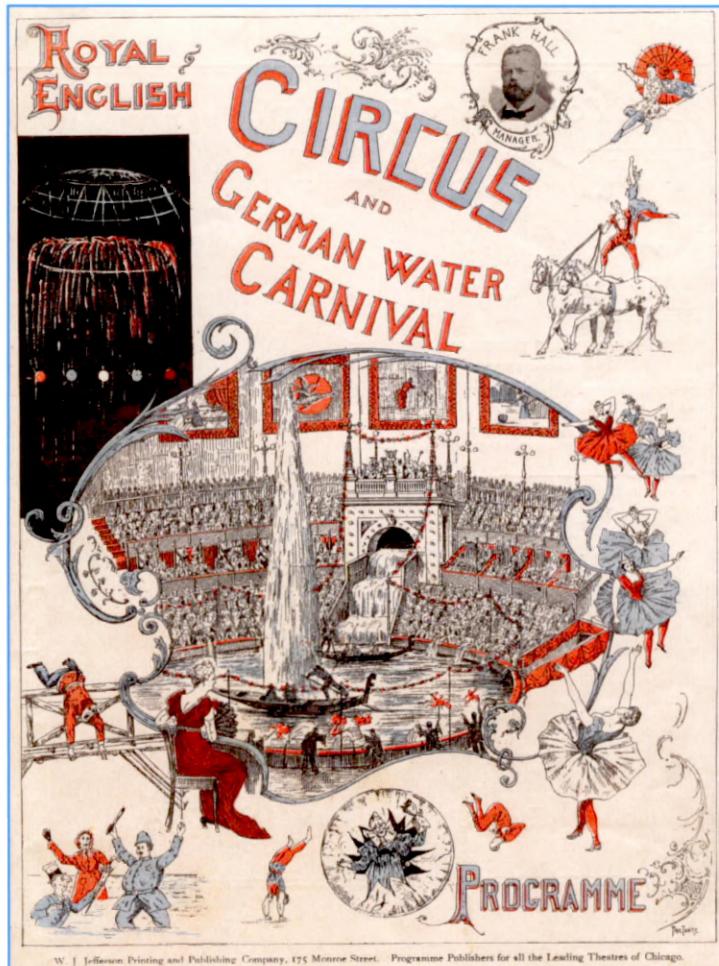
Dockrill's Parisian Circus & Venetian Water Carnival

A circus again opened in the former panorama building on October 13, 1895, but it wasn't the Royal English Circus. Dockrill's Parisian Circus & Venetian Water Carnival, titled as "a genuine American circus," took over the place. Dockrill negotiated and signed a lease with Byron L. Smith, owner of the former panorama structure, and his agent, George W. Newbury, that carried forth through April 1896. No explanation was given for why Hall wasn't in charge. One report said that he earned and lost a quarter million dollars with the circus.⁷⁸ The British and German theming was out; Paris and Venice identity were in.

The physical improvements that Hall had made in the structure for the combination show remained in place through the summer and autumn of 1895 and were reportedly enhanced with further additions. With no other lease prospects in sight, the building owners may have prevailed upon Hall's main man with all the



One of the features of the water portion of the performance was the electric fountain which sprayed water into the air. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.



W. J. Jefferson Printing and Publishing Company, 175 Monroe Street. Programme Publishers for all the Leading Theatres of Chicago.

Though printed on cheap, pulpy paper, *The Royal English Circus* program had nice visual flash, containing the usual act listings and advertisements. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

performer contacts, equestrian director Dockrill, to organize a new troupe to occupy the structure. Printed materials listed Dockrill as proprietor and manager of the new undertaking.

To his credit, Dockrill prevailed upon Frank Hall to serve as the business manager for the new operation. Partnerships between a performer and a businessman date back to the early days of circuses. Each had the skill set and expertise peculiar to different challenges presented by troupe operations. Hall already knew the ropes of the circus and he likely managed the duties without considerable time, or arranged for one of his underlings to handle the details in his name. It was a means to make money with lessened risk.

The Parisian Circus Company was organized and chartered to limit the personal liability of the proprietors, a move likely recommended by Hall based upon past experience. The newly printed letterheads proclaimed the changed title. In admonitions that likely reflect the bad business practices of others, the firm's paper declared "No Person has Authority to sign my Name, or the Companys" and "No Bills Paid unless Goods are ordered by the Company or FRANK HALL, Manager." A retained feature from

Right, a few proud showmen, Frank Hall being one of them, went to the extra expense of having their opening show programs printed on silk. They are rarely encountered today. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Press Opening Oct. 11, 1894.

Royal English Circus AND GERMAN WATER CARNIVAL.

WABASH AVENUE, CHICAGO, ILL.

FRANK HALL, Manager and Originator.
MAZE EDWARDS, Sole Representative.
J. S. FLHERTY, Ass't Manager.
RICHARD H. DOCKRILL, Equestrian Director.

PROGRAMME.

1 OVERTURE The Royal English Orchestra.
C. M. COURIER, Musical Director.

2 Graceful and Difficult Equestrian Act
ELLE ROSE DOCKRILL AND W. O'DALE.
Clown..... ED. BELMONT.

3 Grand Display of Ground and Loft Tumbling,
COMPANY.

4 Hurricane Hurdle Riding,
ROBERT WHITTAKER.
Clown..... AL. ARMER.

5 THE THREE GIRDELLES,
World Renowned Grotesques.

6 Principal Bareback Equestrian Act
MISS JULIA LOWONDA.
Clown..... JOHN FOSTER.

7 Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Statuary
THE SMITH BROTHERS.

8 Juggling on Horseback—the Daring Equestrienne
MISS ROSA LEE.

9 The Famous
LARS LARSEN FAMILY
In their Marvelous Aerobic Feats.

10 Principal Bareback Somersault Act,
WM. O'DALE.

11 Canine Paradox
PROFESSOR BOWERS.

12 Comic Hurdle Riding on his Mule
GEORGE KLINE.

13 Aerial Flights by the Flying Kings
FISHER BROTHERS.

14 MADAM MARENTETTE
The Famous Amazon, will ride and accomplish many feats of high jumping on her celebrated jumping horse, "File-Maker," the highest jumper in the world, clearing a fence 7 ft 4 in. in height.

TEN MINUTES INTERMISSION.

WATER CARNIVAL

The Performance Terminating with the Grotesque
Pantomime entitled:

"THE FATAL WEDDING."

OR TRAMPS ABROAD.
in Three Scenes and numerous Tableaux. Introducing The Great
WATER CARNIVAL.
Produced by Mr. JOHN LE CLAIRE, of Cardiff, England.
Synopsis of Scenery and Incidents:

THE VILLAGE GREEN & BLACKSMITHS FORGE
Early morning, Smiths at work, Tramps Abroad, "Give us food or Work."

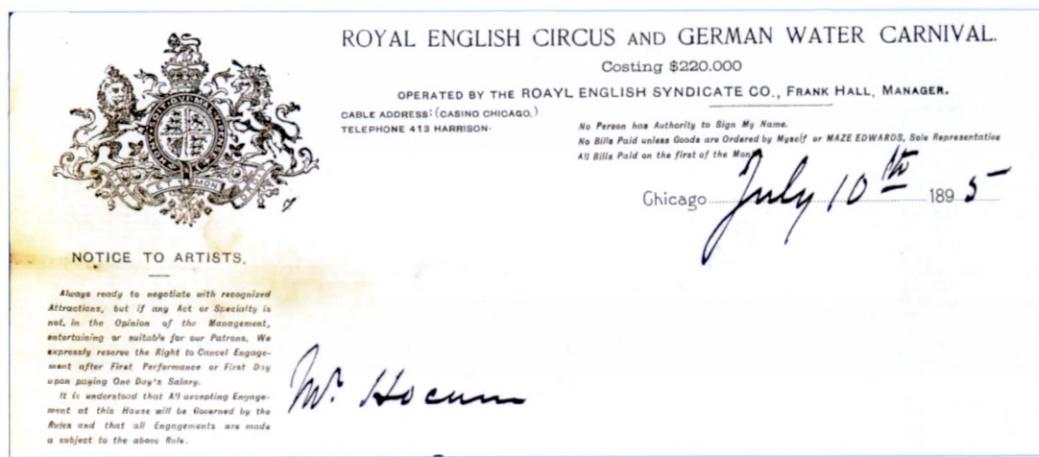
THE HARMONIOUS BLACKSMITHS.
Arrival of the Villagers and Squire, "Haste to the Wedding."

WEDDING FESTIVITIES

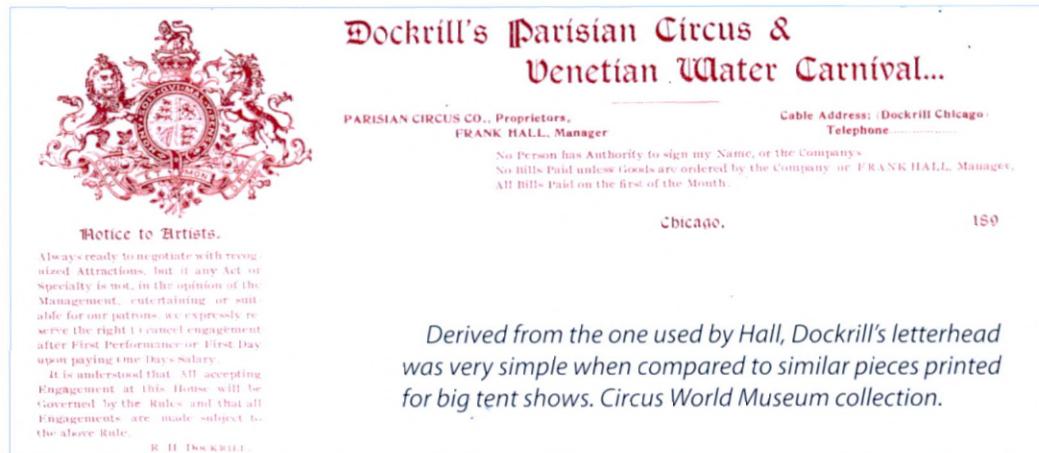
DANCES AND SONGS BY THE FOUR MOONLIGHTERS
The Thieves at work, The Return, Police, Thieves, Searched.
Stolen Goods Recovered, Off to Prison, The Escape.

FETE ON THE LAKE
Castell Brydges' Quartette.
The Arena is now Flooded with,
30,000 GALLONS OF REAL WATER
In the Space of 1 Minute and 45 Seconds.
Arrival of the Villagers and Wedding Party, A Little Regatta, A
Steam Boat, Rowing Boats, Ducks, Frogs, Fishermen are on
this Mimic Lake, The Old Lady in Trouble, The
Police again Consables McFat. McLean and the short of it on the
war path; Lively Work,

SCREAMING FINALE:



Hall's letterhead reveals that he used modern communications, including telephone at his Casino, for conducting his business. Circus World Museum collection.



the Hall operation was the constant turnover of performers, so that ticket buyers were always seeing a new circus. That was truly a novelty in the business.

Based upon an extended "Notice to Artists" statement made on the Dockrill letterhead, it seems that the performer hiring policy was to permit prospective employees to participate in a single show, as a live audition, and to then judge them on their merits for retention. More than likely there were more kinkers available in the winter than there were program spots, resulting in the somewhat unusual try-outs. While a novel concept, it would seem that many ego-driven performing professionals would not submit to such judgment.

To a lesser degree than Hall, Dockrill also had a varying slate of performers that included known ring stars. Numbered among his attractions were: riders Rose Dockrill, and Josie and Willie Marks; hurdle rider William De Van; high diver Henri LaRousse; clowns James R. Adams and William West; child wirewalker Le Petite Martha; a cannon ball juggling and shooting act by Captain Holtum and Mlle. Adela. At the opener there was the novelty of a female ringmaster and clowns, which may have been anonymous appearances by women who were booked with Barnum and Bailey—the Matthews Sisters.

"Speedy," the high diver who had drawn attention away from Hall's show to the Ringling show at Tattersall's in early 1895, was booked as a novelty thrill act by Dockrill. He was actually Richard A. "Dare Death-Defying Dick" McConnell (1872?-1937). He did most of his dives in the Chicago area, one at Cheltenham Park being interrupted by wind that blew him off course and resulting

in the breakage of most of his ribs. His retirement ensued.⁷⁹

To open the season it was necessary to contract the printing of letterheads, contracts, forms and such and the placement of advertising in local newspapers. The surviving Dockrill papers for various and sundry purchases, none of a major magnitude. How much Dockrill and Hall paid to lease the building, and the heft of the performance budget, are unknown.

Matinee ticket prices ranged from fifteen cents to a dollar, while night show admission started at 25 cents and hit the same top. It should be remembered that the Panic of 1893 still had an impact on the country and fixed pricing was hard to sustain. Typical tent circus admissions were twenty-five and fifty cents, but the ten and twenty-cent circuses were then proliferating. Dockrill quickly realized that the winter circus ticket market was very soft and embraced what was termed "popular ticket prices," meaning steeply discounted admissions. Children's matinee tickets were half-price.

With everything ready earlier than announced, the opener was advanced to October 10. One report, without giving specifics, stated that "The

attendance is much better than last season." Dockrill's presentation gained good remarks, but nowhere near the level of Hall's operation. One telling report was this observation: "The bill at Dockrill's circus remains unchanged." The greatest feature and novelty of the 1894 Hall circus was no longer in effect.

No major announcement accompanied the initial failure of the Dockrill circus after about a month of shows. The November 16, 1895 issue of the *Clipper* printed a notice that George S. Wood, business manager, a holdover from Hall's outfit, had taken a new position as press representative elsewhere. No other remarks were made. A trade paper observed, "the performers and creditors stand little show of getting the money due them."⁸⁰

The local press reported the re-opening of the show, now called Dockrill's Winter Circus, on November 23, 1895, but it was essentially the former operation under a new title, minus the water attraction. The water carnival was replaced by a comic pantomime. The loss of the splash and flash feature must have been precipitated by a need to cut the nut, but the impact went far beyond the action.⁸¹

The outlook was mixed. "The attendance at Dockrill's circus gives some reason to hope that it will ultimately resume prominence as an amusement resort. The management has done all in its power to promote success. There will be no change of bill at present." The last sentence sealed the fate of Dockrill's reprise effort. The *Clipper* of December 14, 1895 announced that Dockrill had chosen to end the show, "as the outlook was not favorable." His action closed the book on an interesting chapter in American circus history. Ever optimistic, Dockrill announced that he would "open next season if

the chances for success are as good as he expects."

A Milwaukee Imitator

The post-1836 chronicle of American circus buildings is largely one of adaptive re-use, structures erected to house functions and to serve purposes other than a ring show. They have included horse pavilions, skating rinks, railway stations and exposition structures. Another former panorama structure also served to house one-ring circuses elsewhere shortly after the Hall-Dockrill efforts.⁸²

Thinking that he had a better plan, Herbert L. "Bert" Marshall took possession of a defunct panorama building in Milwaukee and adapted it to house his Royal Circus that opened on May 22, 1897. One suspects that there was knowledge of the Hall title and operation that heavily influenced Marshall. The timing could probably have not been worse, opposite typical spring activity. Cabin fever pushed people out the doors into the freshness of spring in the north. Marshall's royal offering suffered from a lackluster slate of performers and endured but a short time.⁸³

The Legacy of the Royal English Circus

Frank Hall moved on to a new attraction, managing six day bicycle races in 1897.⁸⁴ Someone named Frank Hall attended the Ringling opener at the Chicago Coliseum on April 10, 1901, but it seems more likely that the visitor was Popcorn George Hall's son.⁸⁵ No subsequent references to Frank Hall, the Chicago showman, have been located.

The Carrere-designed panorama building survived the two winter seasons as a circus and was altered to serve various purposes in the freight and auto business. It's best seen in a view showing it as the headquarters of a transfer company in the 1905 city directory.

Ultimately, confusion reigned concerning Hall's experience. As the panorama structure succumbed to the wrecker's ball in 1912, the adieu coverage in *Billboard* identified it, incorrectly as the location of the Battle of Gettysburg panorama. That attraction was the one across the street from the bona fide circus structure. It then reported: "For some months the show drew tremendous business, and although the program was frequently changed, history repeated itself, and within the year it was again demonstrated that a permanent circus in America will not go."⁸⁶ It seems to us that Hall's achievement was obscured by the subsequent quick failure of Dockrill.

One of the best flashbacks concerning the quality of the Hall operation is contained in a 1930s biography of the great rider Charles W. Fish (1848-1895). His tenure at the Royal Circus was unfortunately his last: "During the last days of his career, he [Fish] rode in the 'Winter Circus' on Wabash Avenue, Chicago, and great crowds were turned away. One who went there had 'never seen anything so spectacular and really beautiful. The building was circular, with upholstered chairs, ushers in dress suits, a water carnival that was beyond description, wonderful dancers and Charlie's act.' While in Chicago, he was taken sick and he died May 5, 1895."⁸⁷

It must have been the premature failure of the later Dockrill effort, incorrectly connected to the Hall novelty, which cast a shadow on the legacy of the Royal English Circus.

No financials are available for Hall's operation. On the positive side, Hall's operation completed the entire operation as planned, even in the face of competition from the much larger Ringling show. He also chose to not continue as owner for the winter of 1895-1896. The combination of the two suggests that it made some money, but

perhaps less than could be had by the investment of his time and capital elsewhere. Hall continued with his casino, and into relative obscurity, other than for his Royal English Circus and German Water Carnival venture. No trace of the Royal English Circus structure remains today, nor do any artifacts from it survive other than paper and photographic documentation.

Our best insight into Hall's grand undertaking resides in the saved materials that passed from R. H. Dockrill into the hands of his daughter, Rose Dockrill Holland (1875-1966), who retired to Delavan, Wisconsin. There she remained until her death, interviewed during the time when the Old Milwaukee Days excited a new generation in circus history. Before passing, she was interviewed by Delavan's hometown circus historian, W. Gordon Yadon. Much of the Dockrill material he received was passed along to Circus World Museum. It includes programs, a promotional booklet, printed contract forms, a seating layout and other pieces relating to the Hall circus. The box also contains printed materials for her father's two activities in the former panorama building, plus many of the receipts for expenditures made by her father. In addition to the grand entry march for the Royal English Circus, Rose's own performance music is also preserved in the collection.

A number of other Royal English Circus pieces, including a splendid silk program, ended up with a collection deposited at Illinois State University. The most stellar remnant from the effort to bring a bit of Paris to the Prairie exists in the form of a one-sheet upright lithograph by National of Chicago, preserved in the ISU collection. It is composed differently than most circus lithographs of the time, resembling theater paper in some ways.

It must have been quite a show, which Hall "Guaranteed the best show in America," no less than "The greatest success ever known in the history of amusements." The verbiage seems a bit windy, but that his efforts provided a truly unique and to this day unequalled operation in American circus history cannot be denied.

While this paper was awaiting publication, a fine cabinet photo portrait of Frank Hall was discovered and secured for the Tibbals Digital Collection at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. It's fitting that this story should end where it started, with the enigmatic and "intrepid executive," Frank Hall. *bw*

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Endnotes

1. *New York Clipper*, December 20, 1890, 651. Robert Don Leavay Miller, *Past and Present of Menard County, Illinois*, (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1905), 368-374 and Carmelita Banks, "Petersburg, Ill., A Circus Haven," *State Journal-Register*, November 9, 1984, 8A and 10A. *Billboard*, March 16, 1907, 17.

2. *Clipper*, September 9, 1893, 428 and November 11, 1893, 428.

3. *Clipper*, November 16, 1895, 581 and Crawfordsville, Indiana *Star*, November 21, 1895.

4. Fred Dahlinger Jr. and Stuart Thayer, *Badger State Showmen*, (Madison, WI: Grote Publishing, 1998), 104-105, covers Rodriguez's career.

5. See the author's essay "The American Circus Tent" in Susan Weber et al., *The American Circus*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

6. C. G. Sturtevant, "The Stickney Family," *White Tops*, 3, 5, 3-5 and 28-29, and Stickney's obituary in *Billboard*, March 3, 1928, 88.

7. See "The Circus of the Future" in Maria Ward Brown, *The Life of Dan Rice*, (Long Branch, NJ: the author, 1901), 179-180.

8. John H. McConnell, *Shrine Circus, A History of the Mystic Shriners' Yankee Circus in Egypt*, (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1998).

9. "A Winter Circus," *Billboard*, May 12, 1900, 5.

10. Lorenzo Frediani, "From the Early Years to America, 1866-1908," *Bandwagon*, 41, 2, 34-37.

11. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis, Chicago and the Great West*, (New York:

Norton, 1991) is a landmark interpretation of Chicago's development and importance and inspired this discussion.

12. *Billboard*, December 21, 1912, 22.
13. Noah Miller Ludlow, *Dramatic Life As I Found It*, (1880), 730-733, provides early commentary on Chicago circus history, much expanded in Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of Chicago: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, (1884), I, 472-496. Hereafter cited as Andreas, it also served as the foundation for George L. Chindahl, "The Circus in Early Chicago," *White Tops*, 27, 6, 3 and 5-7. These served as the primary resource for this discussion, as further verified by Stuart Thayer's *Annals of the American Circus 1793-1860*, (Seattle: Dauven & Thayer, 2000) and other documents.
14. "Old-Time Circuses In Chicago," *Chicago Chronicle*, April 16, 1899.
15. Andreas, 472, quoting the *Chicago American*, September 16, 1837.
16. Andreas, 473.
17. Andreas, 494.
18. Stuart Thayer, "Levi J. North, America's Own Horseman," *Bandwagon*, 46, 6, 16-26.
19. *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, 36, (May 1857), 569.
20. Advertisement, George W. Hawes, *Illinois State Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1858 and 1859*, (1859), 430; Andreas, 494. Ludlow, 731, mentions the moving stage.
21. "Old-Time Circuses."
22. John H. Glenroy, *In and Out of Circus Life*, (Boston: M. M. Wing, 1885), 133-134. *Clipper*, December 5, 1863, 262, 270 and 272.
23. C. G. Sturtevant, "James Robinson—The Equestrian King," *White Tops*, June 1931, 4-5.
24. "Yankee Robinson," *Clipper*, September 13, 1884, 404. A trade card at the Circus World Museum provided the address and confirmed operation into 1867.
25. William L. Slout, "Adventures of James M. Nixon, Forgotten Impresario," *Bandwagon*, 46, 4, 4-14.
26. *Clipper*, December 9, 1876, 295; December 16, 1876, 303; December 23, 1876, 311; January 6, 1877, 327. Col. C. G. Sturtevant errantly listed the Stickney outfit in 1877, but not 1876.
27. *Billboard*, December 3, 1932, 76.
28. *Chicago Herald*, November 18, 1883, transcribed in Circus Scrapbook, I, 2, April 1929, 26-28.
29. Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of Chicago*, (1886), III, 671-672.
30. *Commercial and Architectural Chicago*, (1887), 60.
31. John J. Flinn, *Chicago, The Marvelous City of the West. A History, an Encyclopedia and a Guide*. (Chicago: Standard Publishing Co., 1892) was one of many books detailing the city's many features and high points.
32. *Chicago InterOcean*, December 4, 1892 and *Clipper*, December 17, 1892, 654.
33. "New York to have a Winter Circus," *New York Herald*, March 20, 1892.
34. J. A. Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism, The Theatre of Steele MacKaye*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), Chapter Six, details the project.
35. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, March 20, 1897, 5.
36. Frances Stover, "The Panorama Painters' Days of Glory," *Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society*, 24, 4, (1968), 123-128.
37. Eugene B. Meier Jr., an authority on American panoramas, generously shared his knowledge with the author and provided much of the background presented here. A useful resource is Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama, History of a Medium*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
38. *New York Times*, March 2, 1911.
39. *Billboard*, June 16, 1906, 7.
40. Parisian circus structures are covered in Paul Adrian, *Histoire illustrée des cirques parisiens d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, (Paris: the author, 1957) and Christian Dupavillon, *Architectures du Cirque*, (Paris: Éditions du Moniteur, 2011).
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42. Dominique Jando, e-mail, April 24, 2007.
43. Some of the subsequent water shows are addressed in "Aquatic Arenas in Manchester Circuses," *King Pole*, 119 (June 1988), 8-10, and Don Stacey's extensive "Water Spectacles in the Circus," a totally dedicated issue of *King Pole*, 159 Extra (September 2006).
44. F. Berkeley Smith, *How Paris Amuses Itself*, (n. p., 1903), 245-246 and 250.
45. *Clipper*, January 17, 1880, 339 and January 24, 1880, 347.
46. *Clipper*, April 5, 1890, 53, and April 12, 1890, 70.
47. *Clipper*, May 28, 1892, 178.
48. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 28, 1892, 9.
49. Frank E. Hall (1883-1936) was a son of "Popcorn" George W. Hall. The other Frank Hall was an overland show guy styled F. W. Hall, active in 1871-1872 with the Cosmopolitan Circus. He was a member of the Hall & Samples United Wagon Shows out of Nora Springs, Iowa and later Coyville, Kansas in the early 20th century.
50. Crawfordsville, Indiana *Star*, November 21, 1895.
51. The tune was written in 1890 by "Uncle" Will Rossiter (1867-1954) under the name W. R. Williams. His inability to find a publisher caused him to enter the music publishing trade, where he achieved great success.
52. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, February 17, 1894, 14.
53. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, February 2, 1895, 10.
54. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, February 17, 1894, 14.
55. *Clipper*, January 12, 1895, 725.
56. *Clipper*, September 22, 1894, 456.
57. Copies of the booklet are at Circus World Museum and Illinois State University.
58. *Chicago InterOcean*, April 7, 1895.
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60. Other listings are in *Clipper*, October 13, 1894, 509.
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63. Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Illinois, *The Misuse of the National Flag of the United States of America*, (Chicago, 1895), 23.
64. Copies dated October 21, 1894 and January 13, 1895 were accessed at CWM and ISU.
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66. *Clipper*, October 20, 1894, 525.
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68. *Clipper*, October 31, 1894, 509.
69. *Clipper*, November 17, 1894, 591.
70. *Clipper*, December 1, 1894, 623.
71. *Clipper*, December 22, 1894, 671.
72. *Clipper*, February 16, 1895, 798.
73. *Clipper*, March 16, 1895, 18, and March 23, 1895, 38.
74. *Clipper*, April 13, 1895, 86-87.
75. Advertisement, *Chicago InterOcean*, April 21, 1895.
76. *Clipper*, April 20, 1895, 99.
77. *Clipper*, April 27, 1895, 115.
78. Crawfordsville, Indiana *Star*, November 21, 1895.
79. *Billboard*, September 18, 1937, 34.
80. *New York Dramatic News*, November 23, 1895, 20.
81. Unidentified clipping, Dockrill scrapbook, CWM.
82. We will note in passing that famed Strobridge lithograph artist Matt Morgan was involved with the panorama trade, his participation mentioned in the July 4, 1886 issue of the *New York Times*.
83. *Clipper*, May 15, 1897, 179, and May 29, 1897, 202 and 207. *Badger State Showmen*, 109, with additional details in the files for the book filed at Circus World Museum.
84. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, March 6, 1897, 19.
85. 1901 Ringling Bros. *Route Book*, transcript at www.circushistory.org.
86. December 21, 1912, 22.
87. Frank L. Greene, "Charles W. Fish," *Circus Scrapbook*, No. 8, 31-35.



The contrast between fire and water has always made the combination suited to staging spectacular visual effects. Hall closed out his performances with their use, cascading sparks or fireworks from the lofty dome of the building down into the flooded ring. Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.



The great circus building housed a transfer operation in the years after it had been the site of celebrities, smiles and laughter. Image courtesy Eugene B. Meier, Jr.

Museum provided the address and confirmed operation into 1867.

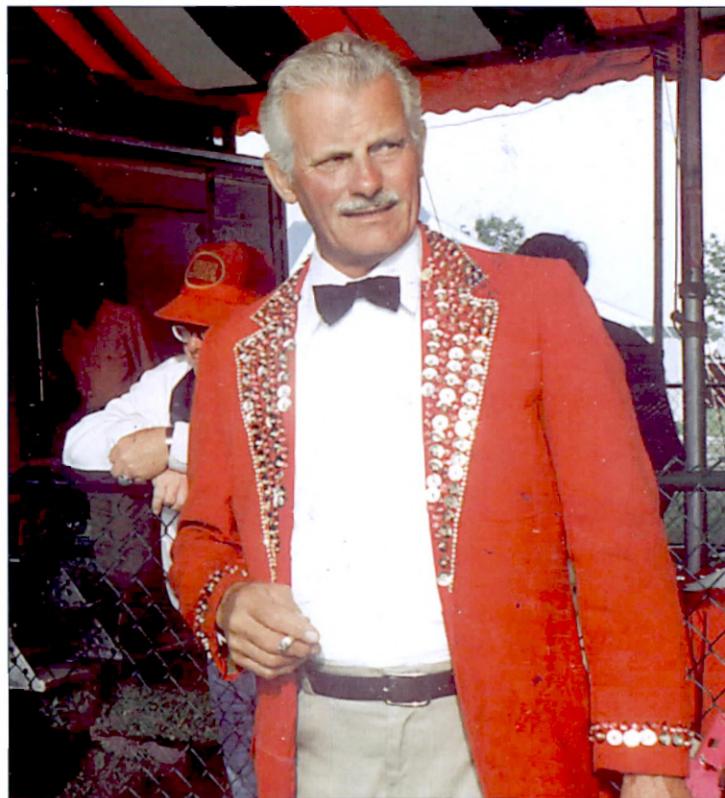
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A Conversation with John Herriott

On August 1, 1998 at Milwaukee's Great Circus Parade Bandwagon editor Fred Pfening III interviewed veteran showman John Herriott about the circus business in general and its great personalities in particular. Reflecting on Herriott's comments fourteen years later, one sees Shrine circuses continuing their downward spiral, *Cirque du Soleil* becoming the largest circus organization in the history of the planet after transforming itself into a for-profit enterprise, Kenneth Feld eclipsing his father's considerable achievement, youth circuses ascending, and big riding acts virtually disappearing.

Pfening: John, you have done many, many different things in your career; you've been a ringmaster, you've worked with horses, you've worked with elephants, and I know you've done other stuff. Could you tell me what you've enjoyed the most, what you like most in the circus business.

Herriott: Well, when I started with my father training dogs and ponies and then elevated to horses and elephants and so on, and I did the training for so many years and then I realized I had a God-given talent for that. The idea of training the animal is the most exciting part of what I do; I enjoy that more than anything else.



John Herriott at the Great Circus Parade in 1993. Nancy Cutlip photo.

P: You find that the most satisfying?

H: Yes, I do. I think that when you can actually communicate with an animal, you get inside their brain, and I can understand an elementary school teacher taking a bunch of little children and elevating their intelligence. It's a wonderful thing. And with animals, it's even more wonderful to think that you can communicate with an animal.

P: How would you assess the state of the circus business today?

H: Well, you know, the circuses have had to upgrade themselves, we know that, and certainly with the modern type costuming that they can buy, and the various types of beautiful lighting and the vinyl plastic tents that are so colorful, I think the colors and the lighting upgraded the circus tremendously. You see a circus like Kelly-Miller on the lot and compare that with some pictures of equal sized shows years ago, with a dirty old tent and I think the circuses have had to upgrade themselves. My god, you're competing with Disneyland and Las Vegas; it's a whole different world out there now.

P: What other major innovations have you seen over your career? You touched on some of them, we know the lighting is much better now, the sound systems are much better. What other changes have you seen?

H: Well, I think the circus probably in the modern day, you can only change it so much, and the innovations would be more business wise than in the venue itself, I think. You know, we've gone through phone promotions and now these free kid tickets circuses are a big hit, but it seems like there's always guys figuring out a way to get the people on those seats and that's what it's all about.

P: Right, that's the sign of a dynamic institution when you see that change, and that really is part of the thing.

H: Well, we have the subsidized circuses nowadays. The Big Apple Circus and Circus du Soleil that get so much money to produce a show, and so on. So, I just have the greatest admiration starting from Kenneth Feld to Johnny Pugh to Dory Miller to David Rawls, boy, those guys have to sell tickets—they gotta sell tickets. And it's wonderful when we can read a review on Big Apple and Circus du Soleil that's kind of has an unlimited budget and they can afford to make some mistakes, but these guys that are out there trying to sell tickets, they can't make too many mistakes or they're going to go down the tube.

P: Do you think there's much of a future for the Shrine Circus, that's certainly an important component of the industry?

H: Well, you know we hear the average age of Shriners is about 65 and, like all the fraternal groups, it's suffering. People aren't joining anything anymore. It seems like it's a no-no, so unless the Shrine can bring some young blood in, you know they're just kind of going to go away. Shrine circuses have got great esteem in every city where they've been an established thing for, what, 80 years or so.

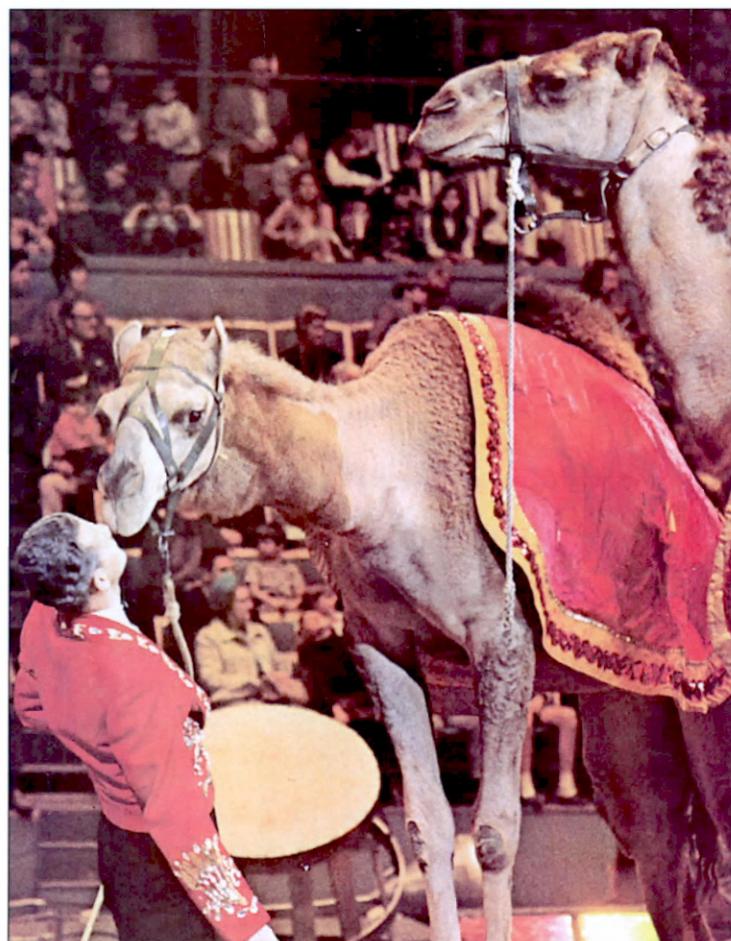
P: That's about right.

H: And so there's a lot of cities that are Shrine circus cities, like Detroit or Minneapolis, St. Paul, Rochester and so on. But I don't know, I wonder about that because you know the Shrines have had to go to telemarketing and various other ways to try and sell tickets; but it's not what it was twenty years ago, that's for sure.

P: Is there a particular show or particular season on a show that stands out in your mind as just a fabulous performance?

H: I think that when you see Ringling Brothers today it's still the Greatest Show on Earth. I mean we can all go and see their dress rehearsal and then people get in their car driving home and start knocking it and criticizing it, but it's still the Greatest Show on Earth. Absolutely! But I think that when I was on the Blue show, the

100th Anniversary edition of the Blue Show, we had three bareback riding acts, we had three big teeterboard acts, we had the wonderful Willie Lenz chimps in Ring One, the great Jackie Althoff bears in Ring Two, and I had a four camel act and a little pony in Ring Three. We had the Stephenson's dogs in the display in the center ring, Alex Sebastian and my wife in the two end rings. What a show. We had bears, we had Charly Bauman, we had Dickie Chipperfield—we had three wild animal acts in the show. And the spec was just unbelievable, Elvin Bale starring with 32 girls in "Bicycle Built for Two," I mean, WOW, that was the Greatest Show on Earth. An interesting thing, when we went into Madison Square Garden we had a little time and my wife and I went to the Radio City Music Hall. We went to all of the various things in New York, Upstairs and Downstairs, the clubs and so on. And we were in a cab one night going back to the train and it occurred to me, you know New York City is the entertainment capital of the world, and we were the biggest thing in town! I mean, that we were the Greatest Show on Earth. No other show had 22 elephants, singing ringmasters, and dancing girls and aerialists and acrobats.



Herriott with his camel act on Ringling-Barnum. Photo from 1971 Blue Unit program courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

P: Yeah. I still think of that as the pinnacle of the circus in America. Ringling Brothers in Madison Square Garden. I think that's it—that's as high as you can go.

H: I always say that back in the days of vaudeville, if you were in vaudeville, the epitome was to play the Palace in New York; if you're in the circus business, you've got to say "I played the Garden," right?

P: Right, but I wonder if also playing that Christmas date with Big Apple at Lincoln Center is also the pinnacle. You disagree?

H: Well, that's wonderful, except, you know, they're a "Johnny come lately." Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus, there's history. And you know the most exciting thing for me as a horse trainer. I went to Minneapolis in the fall [of 1969], when I was in Baraboo and Mr. [Irvin] Feld had hired me and bought my wife's and my acts and bought all the animals that we had at the Circus World Museum, and in the fall Mr. Feld said to me, "Come up to Minneapolis," and he's going to fly in and I drove up to visit my sister and so on, and we'll sign a contract in Minneapolis at the building. So we arrived there and they had a 4:00 and 8:00 show in the fall; it was about 1:30 or 2:00 in the afternoon, not a soul around, and Mr. Feld was going to arrive later. And now, this is going to be an adventure for me. I know I'm going to go on the Greatest Show on Earth, and I walked into the building, it's very quiet, there's nobody in the building, the three rings and the rubber hippodrome track, and I just quietly acquainted myself with the arena floor. You see the show from sitting up in the seats, and then I walked down behind that center ring and I started to step in that center ring and thinking, "My God, Johnny Agee and Rhoda Royal and Charley Moroski and Rudy Rudynoff and Jorgen Christiansen, and here I'm little Johnny Herriott from St. Peter, Minnesota, and I'm going to step in that center ring!" That's heavy duty, that's heavy duty stuff.

P: Yes, indeed. I understand that.

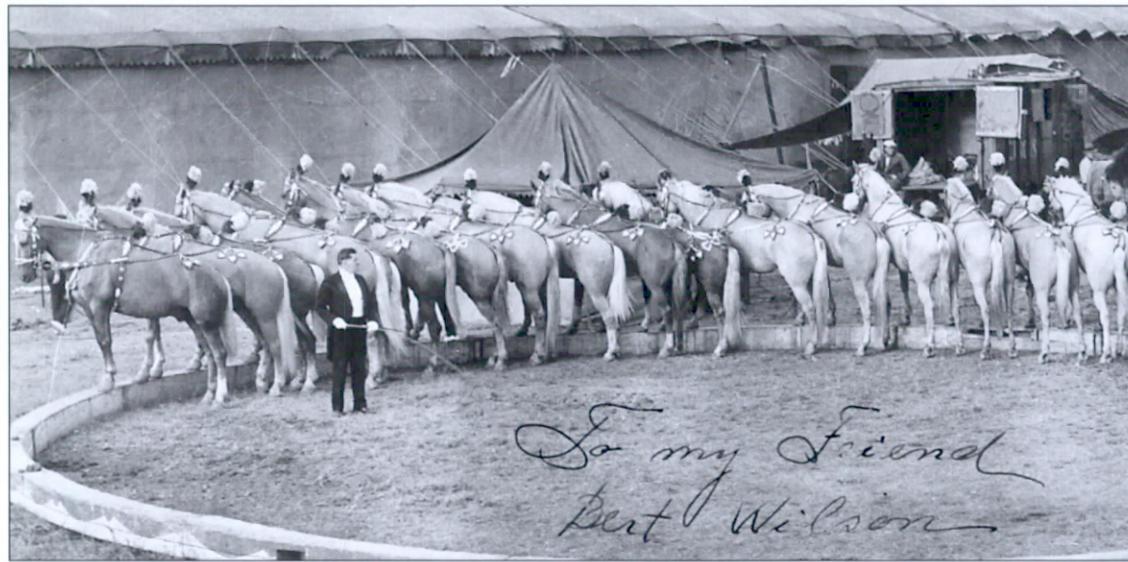
H: You work all your life and say, "Wow, I made it."

P: Yeah, yeah, you're "playing the Palace," when you do that. What acts have impressed you the most—you've enjoyed the most or you thought went over with the crowd, or you just thought were examples of showmanship?

H: Well, Clyde Beatty. When I was a young fellow, I played Detroit a number of times with Clyde Beatty there, and I never missed watching him perform. I used to love to watch him leave his dressing room and walk around in the hallway. He was just a master, master circus man. And I think Con Colleano. I was on the Cole Brothers Circus with Con Colleano, and I always enjoyed watching him perform. And I enjoyed Hubert Castle when he was in his prime. Tito Gaona has been a favorite, and I think Charly Bauman with his tigers, when he was a young handsome man, was a favorite of mine. Oh, it's hard to say and, you know, Struppi Hanneford when she was Princess Tajana, she was exquisite and, also, I think that when you've had a chance to see Lucio and the Cristianis or Justino with the Loyal-Repenskys or Tommy Hanneford with the Hannefords, they're all frosting on the cake, any one of them. But those would kind of be my favorites.

P: Yeah. It's a shame, but one of the things that I'm very saddened about in the contemporary circus, is you've pretty much had a decline of these big riding acts that you had years ago, like, as you mentioned, the Hannefords and the Loyal-Repenskys. And that's really a shame, but I can understand it's economics that have dictated that; but I think we've lost something with that. I just think there's nothing better.

H: Well, even years ago, the smaller shows . . . when a guy would be framing a show back in the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, if he didn't have a liberty act, he didn't have a show. I mean it was just established, he wouldn't consider not having it. Elephants and a liberty horse act were the primary things you had to have. And now, we're kind of



Jorgen M. Christiansen with his great twenty-four horse liberty act on Cole Bros. Circus in 1937 or 1938. Burt L. Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.

getting liberty horses back a little, but they were out of the picture there for a while.

P: Yeah. You'd have the big acts where they'd bring like twenty-four in the ring.

H: Wow, that's the big shows.

P: Yeah, yeah. I think Christiansen did twenty-four, maybe more. You'd know better than I would.

H: Yes, he did.

P: You've probably seen all the great horse trainers over the last fifty years. Either you heard about them from your dad or from the guys you hung out with, or you saw them yourself. Who do you consider some of the really great horse trainers over the last fifty-sixty years?

H: Nobody ever did high school any better—nobody ever will do high school any better—than Capt. Heyer and Starless Night. Never! I think that with the liberty horse presentation, Jorgen Christiansen, Jack Joyce, and, my god, when Charlie Moroski was in his prime on the Ringling circus with his elegant showmanship and presentation, he was "par excellence." And my dad, when we were in the Chicago Stadium with the Cole Brothers Circus and my dad had the twelve palomino liberty horses and we had myself and John Smith in the end rings. My dad was a very handsome man and he made a very wonderful presentation.

P: What are some of the really good elephant acts you've seen over the years?

H: Well, you have to say the Woodcock elephants with Anna May and the three in their prime, when Buckles and Barbara were young and stepped in the ring, that was top drawer. Also, Mack MacDonald with those Polack elephants, they were sensational. They would be my two favorites.

P: Yeah, I think that's who I'd pick, too. Now the other one I liked for big elephants, big displays, spectacle elephant act, was that act that Buckles had on the Blue show.

H: Oh, that was the best three ring elephant display I think in the history of the circus. They had a one foot stand in each ring, he had a pyramid in each ring, and all the rings worked exactly together.

I recall in St. Petersburg, I said to Kenneth Feld in front of Buckles, "You know, that's the best elephant act display they've ever had on the Greatest Show on Earth. Now I never did see the Changing of the Guard, I've seen pictures of it, but Buckles and I laughed because the old elephants, they didn't do like Smokey Jones said, "dot all the i's and cross all the t's," they were pretty sloppy.

P: What managers have you known over the years? Is there one that stands out as really exceptional, one you'd look at and say, "There's a circus man?"

H: I think the cleverest circus manager was Jack Mills; he knew all about managing a circus, every part of it. He went to a trade school in Cleveland in the winter and learned about trucks, gasoline engines; then he went into a school and learned about diesel engines, and he knew all of the aspects of the circus. In fact, there was no money leakage on his circus, He knew exactly how the purchasing agent should buy hay and grain, and what they should buy for the cookhouse. He knew how to handle people. He could hire people at outrageously low wages, and I think he was the cleverest circus manager that I ever saw. Whether he was the most likeable, I don't know.

A guy that I had great admiration for was old Hoxie Tucker. He was quite a guy; he ran two circuses successfully and that's pretty hard—a big chore. The greatest guy I ever worked for was Gil Gray. He had a beautiful Shrine sponsored circus and he made his own costuming and he was a nice man and loved his circus. He was a very dignified guy, but an earthy guy as well. We went out to Disneyland, Mr. Disney hired the elephant and camel and pony acts that I had with Gil Gray, and I appeared in the first year Disneyland was open in what they called the Mickey Mouse Club Circus with all the Mouseketeers performing in the show. Incredibly, Mr. Disney had Mr. Gray design the wardrobe for the Mouseketeers for the aerial number. Incredible, but that's how clever Mr. Gray was. He was a super-duper fellow to work for. Tommy Hanneford is in that same mold, to have a just beautiful, first class circus.



Jack Mills of the Mills Bros Circus in 1951. Harry Atwell photograph, Pfening Archives.

P: Getting back to Jack Mills. I may be wrong about this, but I always think of him as the guy that invented the modern front end; a lot of the stuff shows do to this day. You know, he learned phone promotion from Paul Lewis on the Lewis Bros. Circus in the 1930s.

H: I guess so. You know Jack handled the front end on the show. Jake did the management and what you would call the operations; Jack did the front end promotions and handled all of that. They were a great team, a great team. And Jack Mills, I think that the thousand dollar guarantee contract, that's a hard sell thing; but he did it, you know. He pushed those agents and they did it. He was a very smart man, he always brought a good show; he never wanted to have to alibi because those sponsors had to come up with that money. But, yeah, I think of the one-day phone promotion tent shows, I always understood that Paul M. Lewis started that.

P: Yeah, that's what I've heard.

H: Jack worked for Paul Lewis, so he understood what they call telemarketing now. We called it boiler rooms then.

P: Were you old enough to make any impression about Zack Terrell? Were you ever around there when he was there?

H: No, when my dad was there I went out in the summer time. My dad just had the highest regard for Mr. Terrell. He just thought he was the greatest circus owner and manager, whatever. I met Mr. Terrell a couple of times, but I was scared of him, though, because his reputation was that he was a mean man, you know. The first time I went on the circus, I was in the pad room and they had all the horses and ponies stabled there. I was with my dad, I was so excited. I thought the Cole Brothers Circus was just the greatest thing there was; and here came Mr. Terrell walking in and my dad said, "This is my son," and Mr. Terrell said to me, "Hello there, young man. These sons of bitches just let the best jumping horse we had on the show get down in the cars and it died last night." He loved his horses, he loved them. You know the Cole show, every other act was a horse act, some oddball stuff like boxing horses or 16-horse hitch. It was a great place for a guy who wanted to learn about circus horses.

P: What can you tell me about Obert Miller?

H: Oh my God, what a wonderful man. We were on the Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. in 1944 and my dad—they had made some money in 1943 and 1942—and so they could afford to hire a professional horse trainer. Obert was a pretty good dog and pony trainer, himself, but they hired my dad, and we went to Hugo. I had a great relationship with Obert Miller. I handled one big old mean elephant named Tina on the show, and Mr. Miller paid me fifty



Obert Miller, founder of the Al G. Kelly and Miller Bros. Circus, with a trained mule at Trenton, Nebraska, September 4, 1941. Joe Fleming photograph, Burt L. Wilson albums, Pfening Archives.

cents every day to pull the poles up with Tina, and his son Kelly gave me a dollar every night—Kelly wasn't as cheap as Obert—to pull them down. I just had a great relationship. Mr. Miller was very good to me, and I loved elephants. I loved the smell of them. I was just a kid about twelve-thirteen years old and, in winter quarters Mr. Miller would take Tina from the barn down in Hugo and tie her to a tree down there and let her graze on a long chain every day, and I'd follow him every morning before I went to school. Mr. Miller would say, "Johnny, don't you get too close to her now." But, somehow the elephant accepted me. Yeah, I've got fond memories of Mr. Miller. He sewed the big top, he had a garage beside his house and he had some old sewing machines and my mother was a good hard working woman, and my mother sewed all the sidewall. We had a tornado hit winter quarters and it blew our house trailer way down in the back field and we all lived in the house with Kelly and Dale Miller and my sister and our family. Mr. Miller also slept in the garage; he had a bed there where he sewed his big top. He was a bachelor at that time;

or he wasn't married, anyway. My mother fixed me a little cot up in the attic above the garage, and I didn't have any windows in there. I didn't know if it was daylight or dark. But after that tornado, I'd hear thunder and lightning and I'd be terrified up there, and Mr. Miller would call, "Hey, Johnny." "Yeah, Mr. Miller." "Would you like to come down here with me?" Boy, I'd zing down the steps and crawl in bed with him. Yeah, he was a fine man.

P: You worked for Floyd King for a year or two. What was that like?

H: He was quite a character. We were at the Chicago Stadium Corporation in Peru, Indiana when it was Cole Brothers and Mr. [Arthur] Wirtz owned it, and the Wirtz's decided to dispose of most of the animals. They were framing the big King show—Arnold Malley and Floyd King—so here comes Floyd King and Ira Watts and I worked the twelve palomino horses and I worked the 101 Ranch elephants to show them, and they said they agreed to buy them. And my mother . . . we lived over in Terrell Jacobs' house at that time . . . and my mother fixed a nice dinner and we had Mr. King and Mr. Watts and my dad all sitting there and Mr. King says: "Son," he called everybody son, and was very quiet spoken, he looked like a doctor or dentist, "you did a good job presenting those animals and we'd like to offer you a job to come with those animals on the King Bros. Circus." I said, "Well, I'd be very interested in doing that. How much would you pay me, Mr. King?" He said: "Well, son, I think we could give you about \$50 a week and

cookhouse and a sleeper." And I said: "Well, really I don't think . . . I get \$40 here in winter quarters, I think I'd like to make more money than \$50. Listen, I've never done it, Mr. King, but maybe I could sell tickets." Oh, did his eyes light up. He said, "Hey, son, you sure could do that. In fact, we could give you a pretty good location ticket box, if you wanted to do that." And I said: "Well, that sounds good. What

agents, calling phonemen, so he would spend his mornings down in the hotel, and then when the parade came down around the square—I was a parade marshall—and Mr. King; here's this little old man with glasses and speckled greyish hair with a nice suit on with a yardstick. He'd come out of the hotel with a yardstick and when the hippo den would go by, he would step out in the street and take the yardstick and poke the hippo to get it up out of the water so the people could see the hippopotamus. And people would look and wonder what's that old man doing with the yardstick? Yeah, he was quite a guy. He called everybody son; he was a great press agent. I read his history; he was, way back in, what, 1917, the head press department on Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, and quite a colorful career. He liked his ding show; he had a wild life ding show on the midway. He had a lot of larceny in his heart in kind of a nice way; if that's the way you can say it.

P: I know what you mean. When I was a kid, he was just this nice old guy to me. My dad really liked him; he was very friendly and would always answer my questions about what he did on Cherokee Ed's Wild West in 1909 and other early shows. Then I found out he was this grifter, had all these run-ins and had all these problems.

H: Jake Rosenheim, Frank Ormond and Floyd King were all married to the same woman at one time, and I heard she was a pretty high stepping gal.

P: I didn't know that! Now, I know you never worked for him, but it seems to me if we're talking about outstanding managers, you've got to include Art Concello in this.

H: I got acquainted with Concello in the years since I've moved to Sarasota, Florida, and I had some nice conversations with him and I felt I got pretty well acquainted with him. My personal observation is that he's the greatest circus manager, circus impresario since W. C. Coup. I think that there's nobody in my generation and . . . he's the greatest of all of them. Innovations like the seat wagons that he did with Ringling, being an astute circus manager, and what he did with the Clyde Beatty Circus, and his whole career. I think he's the most important circus personality, up until he retired, since W. C. Coup.

P: He might be the most important circus manager of this century. I think you could make that case.

H: You said it better than I could say it.

P: Yeah, I think you could make a case for that. Another guy you might be able to make a case for would be Irvin Feld.

H: You know Irvin Feld was a wonderful breath of air for the circus business because



Floyd King was one of the last devotees of the circus parade. The big show band on his 1955 King Bros. Circus rides atop a wagon built by Charlie Lucky at the Macon, Georgia winter quarters the previous winter. Don Smith photograph, Pfening Archives.

is the commission, what commission percentage would I get for selling tickets?" And Mr. King says, "Well, son, I'll tell you, you just take your best holt." There was no commission.

P: That sounds like him.

H: It was the walkaways and you could shortchange them a little, I guess.

P: I think his talent was more as an advance agent than a manager.

H: You know he loved the parade, he loved the daily parade, and he loved the hippodrome races, and we did that because we brought the Cole show stuff there and did the chariot races, Roman standing and all that. And we had the bell by the bandstand. Harry Thomas was the ringmaster, but Floyd loved to come in and ring that bell himself; you know they'd ring the bell and announce the races, and he loved that, and also the daily parade. He lived in a house trailer, he had little children; he married his wife Vicki, a young woman, and they had very little toddlers there. Here this man about seventy-some years old and the back of his car with the little baby playpen in the back. But, he would always go down in every town and check in to the leading hotel, because he had some work to do on phones, calling



Irvin Feld, one of the all-time great American showmen. Ringling-Barnum press photograph.

he was like Harry Cohn or Jack Warner or L. B. Mayer. He was like a Hollywood movie mogul, and that's the way he operated the circus. He loved his circus stars, but he liked to quibble with them, too, over money or whatever. He loved his circus, every time he visited one of his shows, he always watched the performance. I was on the Ringling Circus, and I would think he would get so bored, but he loved it. And he could tell if a clown changed from a red nose to a green nose, or if some guy had the wrong shoes on; I mean minute details about the performance. And, boy, could he sell tickets! He just did it all, Irvin; he was a monumental guy, but he had great rapport with his performers. He would give you . . . you know, he would complement you. I remember once in Madison Square Garden at intermission, I was sitting back on a bale of hay by the horses with the grooms, and Mr. Feld comes walking at intermission with his entourage to go to the office for a few minutes, and he called me over. He stopped in the middle of everybody there and called me over. "Hey, John, I think that horse display was beautiful. You and your wife got first turns to come back to my circus next year." I just think, "Wow." I mean now you really want it, he had the right psychology.

P: Would you consider that the high point of your career when you were with Ringling Brothers?

H: Well, it was as far as being with the Greatest Show on Earth. I suppose. You know I liked being with the Clyde Beatty Circus in Commack, Long Island. It was like the last of the old circus; it was like Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto. It was that little nut shell that was left. The operation, the management, we had a good band with Charlie Schlarbaum, and I had six liberty horses and I rode my high school horse. To know that this is a real circus, I just liked that; that was a high point. Another high point in my career as a ringmaster, I used to play Detroit years ago for Orrin Davenport, I played it with Al Dobritch and [Logan] Fleckles and all the producers. The great ringmaster Harry Thomas was on Cole Brothers and he was always in Detroit for Orrin Davenport, and he epitomized the circus ringmaster. One of the high points in my life was to be the ringmaster in Detroit, following in the footsteps of Harry Thomas.

I was so proud. I had always admired him as a great circus announcer-ringmaster.

P: Well, certainly the pinnacle of Shrine Circus in America is to play Moslem Temple."

H: That's right. That's like "playing the Palace."

P: In that end of the business, it is.

H: So I've been fortunate, I played all the Palaces.

P: Were you there the night the Wallendas fell at the Detroit Shrine in 1962?

H: Yes, I was.



George Hanneford, Sr., on right, with band leader Bill "Boom Boom" Browning at the New York Coliseum Christmas Circus on December 16, 1962. Frank Meeker photograph, Pfening Archives.

P: What was that like? Tell me about it.

H: I was there with a camel act from Mills Bros., one that I had trained on Gil Gray, and when I went to Mills Bros., they bought the camel act. I worked it in the center ring in a display, with chimps and dogs and ponies. Then following that display, the Wallendas worked, and following the Wallendas the Hanneford family closed the first half. I was walking with my whips to the back, down the hippodrome track, and old Mr. George Hanneford, he was a great guy and loved to talk and cut up jackpots, was standing with his whips waiting to go on with the bareback horses. We had a conversation—I don't recall about what—but I had my back to the arena. He was a small man and looking kind of over my shoulder. We were talking a long time, and all of a sudden he said, "Oh, my God, they're falling down!" I turned around and boom, boom, oh, it was horrible. There was no net, and Karl and Herman Wallenda were holding the girl. They caught her in midair; and Karl was hanging upside down with his leg wrapped around the wire. He got an awful hernia from that, but the girl was hanging there screaming. We all ran out there and there was no net, but Tommy Hanneford had this pad that he used to jump over the horse and out of the ring and roll on the pad like a tumbling pad. We held this pad, but it was slippery with no handles on it, and then Karl dropped her into the pad. She didn't get hurt, but that was a very tragic time. Horrible.

P: Was that about the worst thing you ever saw? The worst accident?

H: I guess so. I've seen other people fall off the high wire. I've seen people fall off the trapeze. I've never been badly hurt. I've been knocked down by elephants, but not seriously injured. That Wallenda fall would be the most tragic thing I've ever seen.

P: Can you tell me a little bit about Orrin Davenport?

H: You know he had been a great bareback rider, just like Tommy Hanneford. Tommy's like in the mold of Orrin. And Orrin was a great somersault rider, and then he started out—in what history I know of him—being like an equestrian director around shows and then got around those Shrine dates, most especially Detroit. He got to know Eddie Stinson who was the circus chairman for Moslem Temple in Detroit. He got in as a producer and put on some great shows. Orrin always hired the best circus acts. If an act worked on Ringling for a couple of years, Orrin would grab them right quick, such as Victor Julian's dog act and Unus. A lot of great acts went from Ringling to Detroit. You know, he had those dates for so many years; he was Mister Shrine Circus; he had seventeen weeks of



Orrin Davenport, shown here wearing his Circus Producer fez from Cleveland's Al Sirat Grotto in 1946, was the leading producer of North American fraternal circuses through the early 1960s. Ted Deppish photograph, Pfening Archives.

Shrine Circus dates. He had a great relationship with Zack Terrell and with John North of the Ringlings, and so he could bring their horses and elephants to his winter dates. He just had quality shows. When I knew him he had very bad legs, he had to walk with a cane, and he would sit in a chair and watch the show, and he was not demonstrative; he would just sit and watch it. If he thought something was wrong, he might quietly call Harry Thomas over or something. When I was there, he said to me: "Young fellow, you line up the spec back here," and that was my beginning as assistant to a ringmaster. I was scared, because some of those old pro acts; here I'm a young punk like me standing there and "All right, line up here." So I did it very tactfully. But Orrin said: "Hey, young fellow, you line my spec up." Yeah, he was quite a guy. He had all the big dates.

P: Yes, I agree. Now the guy that followed him a few years later in Detroit was Al Dobritch, of course.

H: Well, you know Dobritch was a great guy, but he was a "Johnny come lately," and he didn't last too long. There's so many people, that's one interesting thing, there's so many people in this business that are "the second coming of Christ" for maybe five or six years and then you sit around on a bale of hay and say, "Whatever happened to so and so?" And then there are the people that are sustaining; they're in there for the long haul. I kind of like that. You know, it's fun to be on a circus and you've got maybe a Hanneford, a Cristiani, a Zerbini, a Rosaire or a Herriott, we're the foundation, and I don't mean that in a cocky attitude, but, boy, we're the people who are responsible for keeping this business going. And my daughters, now, I'm so delighted Cindy goes with the Ringling show, and my daughter Weiner and her husband have made a mark in Shrine Circus productions. It's nice to know, not only nice to know, but we are the foundation, this circus family. The Nock family, they're always out there doing it, and Sylvia Zerbini or Patricia Zerbini or Laura Herriott.

P: And you see they're going to be continuing on and, hopefully, they'll have children. Maybe you'll have grandchildren in the circus business.

H: But they're the life blood of the circus, too. They're not phonies, you know. They all got a background and they know how to do it. You see Mark Karoly knock 'em dead in here; that's because he's an old pro.

P: That's right, and that's a problem with the business. New talent pretty much has to grow up in the business or have your family teach you these skills, at least with American performers. We don't have much in the way of circus schools. Where would your daughters have learned if it hadn't been for you and Mary Ruth?

H: They wouldn't. That's so true, they wouldn't.

P: You know we've always been different

in this country because we've never had this tradition of circus schools like they have in Europe.

H: Yeah, but still the Bauers and the Nocks and those people that came from Europe and they continue here. They're going to be a very important facet of the circus for years to come, like my family and other families. And there's camaraderie there. We're all proud of ourselves and proud of our heritage, and we're proud of our future. And that's a very sustaining thing. It's a nice thing to know. And we're all competitive, too, you know. There's a lot of... I wouldn't say envy or jealousy but there's a lot of competitiveness. My daughter Cindy works liberty horses, Sylvia Zerbini works liberty horses. You know they want to get out there and do their best. When Buckles and I were elephant trainers, and we've been dear friends all our lives, but, boy, I'm always trying to get one up on Buckles if I can.

P: Yeah, and he wouldn't mind doing that to you, either. You're right. You know what's nice? You see Karoly using his daughter in the act, and you see Jorge and Lou Ann Barrada using their two children.

H: And another thing, I just don't think the general public really realizes this. We all know each other. A guy who owns some other business, the guy twenty, fifty or a thousand miles away is in the same business; they don't even know each other. We all know each other. In Europe, we all know each other. We all know who's with what circus; we know who's who; and this year who is going to be with such and such a show, who's pregnant, who got divorced, who's getting married, and whatever. We're such a close knit international group of people because we all know each other.

P: That's right; that's a good point. I worry about that, you know. There are these families, but I just wonder where the talent's going to come from in the future; maybe there's enough families to sustain this.

H: I don't think you're going to see a riding act like the Karoly riders in the future, because that's just fine tuned from the Hanneford family; and where are you going to see that again? I've watched a lot of high wire walkers, but nobody steps out on that wire with a balance pole like a Wallenda. There's a little knacky way they do that that is just the old pro look.

P: That's the art of the thing, and that's one of the things that I thought Clyde Beatty was so good at. You know, he'd go in there and look like he was getting killed every performance.

H: When you see Mark Karoly run at that finish horse with the bells on, it's all traditional, you wouldn't run a finish horse without the bells on. Maybe the people can't hear them, but you're going to put bells on; and that music is going to go to that last strain when Mark jumps off that horse and he finally does that big run in. **BW**



Mark Karoly, one of the last of the great comedic riders in the tradition of Poodles Hanneford, during a performance of Tommy Hanneford's Circus at the 1992 Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee. Nancy Cutlip photo.

Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity

by Jan Todd

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Kate Carew, an unconventional newspaperwoman, was famous in the early twentieth century for a “New Journalism” approach to the interview in which she conveyed her own impressions about how it felt to be in the presence of the Progressive Era’s leading celebrities. To be featured by this print version of Barbara Walters meant the interviewee was a person that mattered. Sarah Bernhardt, Ethel Barrymore, Theda Bara, D. W. Griffith, Mark Twain, Pablo Picasso,

Bret Harte, Jack London, Emil Zola, the Wright brothers, and Teddy Roosevelt, for example, all made space on their calendars so Carew could do an interview and then draw pen and ink caricatures of them to accompany her stories.¹

In early April of 1911, Carew turned in a full-page article and three drawings of New York’s celebrity du jour—the professional strongwoman Katie Sandwina, who’d just been promoted to the center ring in Barnum and Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth.² Carew’s article was an overwhelmingly positive piece that helped to ensure Sandwina’s status as a major star. The author’s carefully chosen words and neatly-drawn cartoons created a majestic, yet decidedly feminine, image of the strongwoman that was reprinted in newspapers across the United States. Further, Carew’s piece provided other journalists with a vocabulary of flattering adjectives and allusions that turned up again and again in articles written about Sandwina in the years that followed.³

Although parts of Sandwina’s story have been recounted in newspaper articles, in reminiscences in muscle magazines, and in several academic publications—including *Iron Game History*—surprisingly little attention has been paid in any of these pieces to Sandwina’s two seasons with the Barnum and Bailey Circus in 1911 and 1912, despite the fact this was clearly the period of her greatest fame in the United States.⁴ Weightlifting pundits have spent considerable time debating how much she actually lifted overhead, and whether she

deserves the title of “Strongest Woman that Ever Lived”—which Barnum and Bailey’s publicity staff bestowed on her with a full-color promotional poster of her act in 1912.⁵

The story of how Sandwina got to Barnum and Bailey’s center ring and simultaneously emerged as a glamorous beauty despite her “masculine” profession and large stature is an equally fascinating tale and represents an interesting case study in the construction of identity. Carew’s article in the *New York American* was, in reality, the capstone of a carefully crafted campaign orchestrated by Dexter Fellows, press agent for the Barnum and Bailey Circus. How involved Katie and her husband Max Heymann were in the decision to promote her in this new way is unknown, although the Sandwinas seemed to embrace their new roles once circus management told them that they no longer wanted an act called “The Sandwinas”—but did want an act called “Katie Sandwina and Troupe.”⁶

It was a delicate balance Fellows, Katie, and Max were trying to achieve—to make people want to see a woman perform strength stunts and at the same time to make her a celebrity with broad cultural appeal. Carew certainly helped the cause. She opened her article by writing, “Lo! These eyes have beheld the Superwoman. Her head is the head of Juno. Her form is fit for a mother of kings and heroes. She is twenty-five years old, weighs 210 pounds and moves as lightly as a greyhound. . . . She is as majestic as the Sphinx, as pretty as a valentine, as sentimental as a German schoolgirl, and as wholesome as a great big slice of bread and butter.”⁷ Throughout the article Carew employed remarkably positive descriptions of Sandwina’s body and general appearance. “Her head is large,” wrote Carew, “and that makes the beauty of her features positively startling. With her curled upper lip and her classic chin, she has the look of some heroic



During her second season with Barnum and Bailey Sandwina appeared in the June 8, 1912 issue of the National Police Gazette. This image was designed to be saved and framed, and few athletes were granted such treatment by the Gazette unless they were true celebrities or beautiful women. Katie was considered both.



work in marble. . . . Her throat is a column. Her shoulders and back might have been hewn by Michel Angelo [sic].” Continuing, Carew explained that Sandwina was not at all masculine and that although Katie’s arms could lift 240 pounds overhead, they were still supple and smooth enough to show off in a ball gown.

Sandwina, she proclaimed, had “No horrid lumps of muscle, dears—just a little ripple under the skin, like mice playing in a mattress.”⁸

That Carew could wax so rhapsodic about a tall, sturdily-built, strength athlete weighing over two hundred pounds seems amazing given our twenty-first-century preference for hyper-slender women. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, there were several competing ideals of feminine beauty, according to historian Valerie Steele, and one of the most popular types was the large, robust woman referred to by historian Thomas Beer as a “titaness.” It was a type, wrote Steele, in which simple prettiness “had given way to height, grandeur and sturdiness.”⁹

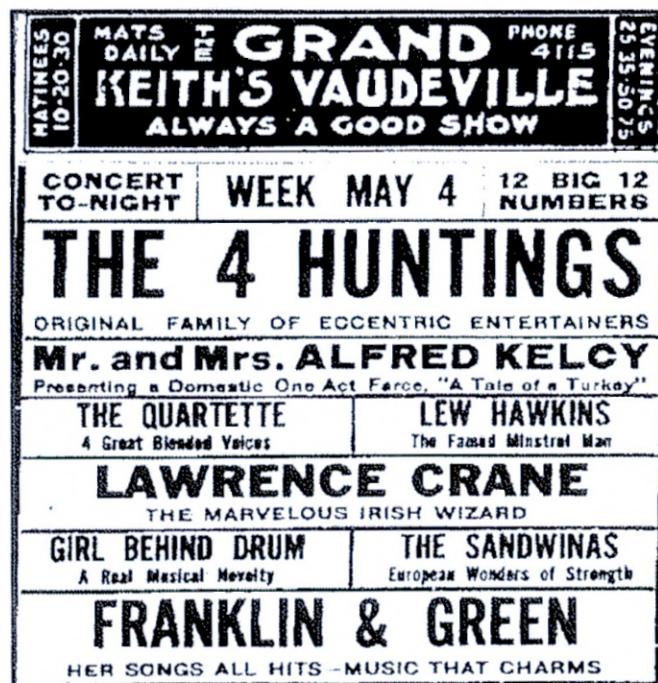
There was, however, apparently something unique about Katie Sandwina. Patricia Galli, who married Sandwina’s second son Alfred in 1944, described her as “beautiful . . . close to six feet tall, with black, Spanish eyes and very soft spoken.” Galli also recalled that Katie—who by then, of course, was over 60 years old—“didn’t show much muscling, just firm curves. She painted her finger and toe nails,” said Galli, “and you may find this surprising, but I believe Katie was the most feminine woman I’ve ever known.”¹⁰ And professional strongman Ottley Coulter, who saw Sandwina perform several times, could not deny Katie’s beauty even though he doubted she was as strong as Barnum and Bailey’s press agents claimed. Wrote Coulter in a letter to David P. Willoughby, “I doubt that [strongman Louis] Cyr or [Warren] Travis could equal Sandwina for public appeal. . . . I saw Katie perform several times and consider that she was a wonder. She was billed as Europe’s Queen of Strength & Beauty. I must say she appeared beautiful to me.”¹¹ In a letter to Jack Kent, Coulter similarly observed, “She had everything, even sex appeal.”¹²

Even if Sandwina was a nonpareil among titanesses, physical appearance alone does not explain why she connected so powerfully with the American press in 1911 and 1912. The Carew interview, for example, linked Sandwina with many of the important social movements of the day—particularly eugenics, suffrage, physical culture, and “New Womanhood.”¹³ Sandwina was also identified, however, with certain elements of “separate sphere” ideology—the Victorian view that women’s greatest influence was to be found through homemaking and childcare—and in Carew’s article and many other pieces, Sandwina emphasized her maternal nature during her time with Barnum and Bailey, a fact which confirmed her sexuality in the public’s mind and made her seem less threatening.

Unlike other strongwomen working at the turn of the century, Katie was never considered masculine, too large or unattractive during the early years of her career.¹⁴ Even William Inglis’ light-hearted piece in *Harper’s Weekly* warning men of this new challenge to male hegemony describes Sandwina as possessing, “as pretty a face, as sweet a smile and as fine a head of silky brown curls as a man could ask to see.”¹⁵ In other newspaper articles from these years, Katie is called a goddess, beautiful, majestic, feminine, and completely charming. And in 1912, when the Barnum show’s publicity staff cooked up a beauty contest pitting circus women against Broadway showgirls, Sandwina’s name was at the top of the list to uphold the circus’ reputation.¹⁶ New York newspaperman

Franklin Fyles saw the Barnum and Bailey Circus in early April 1911, for example, and remarked upon the large number of women playing starring roles in that year’s show. While Fyles did not care for the Japanese wire walker’s brand of beauty, describing her as a “chubby Jap girl with stubby legs, knotted and gnarled muscles, like an old-time ballet premiere’s,” he found Sandwina to be “positively the most commanding beauty I have seen staged in years. Katie is a full six feet in height . . . with no suggestion of either soft fat or hard muscle. . . . She stood forth like Venus in something like what sculptors call heroic size, feminine in aspect and extra-gentle of visage; yet she did all the acrobatic things common to the best men in the circus and bounced her husband about like a rubber ball.”¹⁷

Margaret Mooers Marshall, who interviewed Sandwina backstage, provocatively reported: “Mrs. Sandwina had received me in her own apartments, and under a thin dressing gown, her supple, beautiful figure bent and curved as she brushed her long brown hair and talked. She was an unconsciously perfect illustration of her text that beauty is strength, strength beauty.”¹⁸ Near the end of Barnum and Bailey’s run at Madison Square Garden, Charles Eldot summed up the fourth estate’s nearly unanimous opinion: “In an entertainment where there are 1000 persons taking part it is a difficult thing to single out individuals for mention in detail but the press of New York . . . have selected Katie Sandwina, the strong woman, as the most perfect specimen of womanhood that has ever been seen and



This ad appeared in the Syracuse Herald of May 3, 1908. The Sandwinas were not headliners in the show and Katie was not recognized individually. In other newspaper ads from the act's early period in America, its members were described as "European Acrobats Extraordinary," and "European Athletes."

are exploiting her as the greatest single attraction the circus has offered in many years.”¹⁹

Historian Janet Davis argues that circus owners particularly sought out female performers in the era just before World War I in order to capitalize on the public’s interest and confusion about the emergence of a new kind of womanhood. Writes Davis, “In an era when a majority of women’s roles were still circumscribed

by Victorian ideals of domesticity and feminine propriety, circus women's performances celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social norms.²⁰ Sandwina's performances were certainly about power—she physically dominated her husband, Max Heymann, lifting him overhead as if he were a light barbell—and the evidence of her physical size and superior strength led to a certain sexual *frisson* in the audience as they watched the pair go through their act. Carew, in fact, told Sandwina, "Oh, I would give anything to be able to bat a man around like that."²¹

All the reporters remarked on the size disparity between Katie—who stood in various reports anywhere from 5' 9" to 6' 1" tall at a bodyweight of 200-220 pounds—and her husband Max, who was 5' 6", 156-165 pounds.²² While Max's size was important given the fact that he often constituted the "weight" she lifted in her daily routine, circus patrons no doubt also indulged in quiet speculation about marital relations between the physically mismatched pair.²³ The anomaly of the woman being both larger and stronger than her male partner was not just unconventional; it was radical, and more than one reporter suggested that Sandwina was proof that suffrage could work, that "the 'female Hercules,' was a living argument in favor of equal franchise."²⁴ One reporter even warned his readers, "The anti-suffragists who go to the Barnum and Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden, and see Sandwina, the German strong woman, lift her husband and two-year-old son with one arm, tremble for the future of the anti-cause. When all women are able to rule their homes by such simple and primitive methods, they will get the vote—or take it."²⁵ Sandwina did not discourage the connection. A supporter of the women's suffrage movement, she became vice president of the suffrage group that formed within the Barnum and Bailey Circus in 1912. Some reporters even began referring to her as "Sandwina the Suffragette."²⁶

So while Sandwina may have had feminist leanings, she nonetheless didn't overlook the opportunity to use the birth of her first son, Theodore Roosevelt Martin Beck Sandwina, to confirm herself in the public's mind as a "true woman" who saw motherhood and domesticity as important aspects of her selfhood.²⁷ Teddy, as he was called, was born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1909, and according to press clippings, Katie took almost no time off from her vaudeville obligations at the Orpheum Theater, even doing two shows with all her normal stunts on the evening before his birth.²⁸ The New York press was fascinated by these maternal aspects of Sandwina's life. The fact that Teddy—who was quickly dubbed "Superbaby" by the press—weighed 50 pounds at age two, and could "pick up a twenty-five pound dumbbell and run around and play with it like it was nothing," prompted Carew and other interviewers to include Sandwina's advice on childrearing and the feeding of children in their articles so that other children might also become large and strong.²⁹ While "Superbaby" was paraded in front of reporters during several important interviews in New York in 1911, he did

not travel with the circus for the rest of the summer but, rather, was left behind at a boarding pre-school in Westchester.³⁰

Teddy's unusual vigor—and Katie's own size and strength—were also perceived, however, as validation of the Progressive Era theory of eugenics.³¹ Carew focused on this aspect of the Sandwina story, concluding, "In fact, for a couple centuries or more, the mighty-muscled people of Bavaria have been intermarrying and turning out large families of great athletes, culminating in the gigantic and beautiful young creature who now twirls her lord and master over her head twice a day in Madison Square Garden."³²

Katie's strength and physique were undoubtedly influenced by her genetic heritage. She was born in the back of a circus wagon belonging to Phillippe and Johanna Nock Brumbach on May 6, 1884 either in, or just outside, Vienna, Austria.³³ Her father Phillippe, who stood 6' 6" tall and weighed approximately 260 pounds, was one of the strongest men in Germany during the 1890s and could reportedly lift more than 500 pounds with one finger.³⁴ Katie's mother, Johanna, whose measurements were reportedly close to Katie's own, was, like Phillippe, also descended from a long line of circus performers; and when she wasn't overwhelmed by child care, she performed as a strongwoman.³⁵ There were eventually 15 or 16 Brumbach children; Katie was born second, and was the eldest daughter. Three of her sisters, Barbara, Marie, and Eugenia, also became professional strongwomen. Another sister appeared as Wilma Morely in an acrobatic act.³⁶

When Katie began actually performing outside her family's circus is not clear. She began doing handbalancing with her father at a very young age (some papers suggest that she did handstands on her father's arm at age two), and probably began lifting light dumbbells while still a small child; by her mid-teens she had grown into a large and powerful young woman.³⁷ In newspaper

accounts published in 1911, Katie dismisses the idea that she did any special training as a child, stating in one article: "I never trained myself to be strong. . . . My mother had fifteen children and she was too busy keeping us going to pay any attention to training us. I was just born strong and big, that's all."³⁸ Dr. H. L. Lepworth of Chicago, however, who claimed in *Physical Culture* to have known Sandwina, stated that she began exercising at age five and was fourteen when she began more systematic training in tumbling, artistic dance, apparatus work, and "light and heavy dumbbell work." By the time she was seventeen, Katie was stronger than most young men and, according to Lepworth, her natural strength brought her to the attention of "Professor August Schwore, who began to teach her weight-lifting, and fifteen months later she broke two records, held in Germany by women."³⁹

According to Max Heymann, when he met Katie in Zwickau, Saxony she was sixteen years old and had become the star of her father's circus. Max recalled that as the finale of her act Katie would take on any man or woman who wanted to try to best her in a wrestling match. Max, who was then nineteen, had not been



One of Katie's signature tricks was to lift her husband Max Heymann over her head with one arm.

successful in trying to build his own acrobatic career and so decided to try to win the 100 marks offered to anyone who could pin her.⁴⁰ In an article written just a year after her death in 1952, Max claimed that when Katie quickly threw him to the ground in their match, they realized they loved each other and decided that very same day to run away and get married over the protests of her family.⁴¹ This story, the veracity of which has been questioned by several weightlifting historians, does not appear in any of the press



Kate poses for Frederick Glasier on Barnum and Bailey in 1912. This image would have caused many a man's heart to beat faster a hundred years ago. Image courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Glasier Glass Plate Negative Collection.

clippings from Katie's time with Barnum and Bailey.⁴² It also doesn't match up with the information the Heymann family reported to the U. S. Census Bureau in 1930, which included a question about their respective ages at the time of their marriage. According to that form, Katie was nineteen and Max was twenty-one.⁴³

What we know definitively is that by 1905 Katie and Max were performing with at least one and possibly two other men in an act known as "The Sandwinas." Whether the

Talking with the World's Strongest Woman

The following interview with Katie Sandwina appeared in a German newspaper, the Woven Man Spricht, on December 8, 1910, and is reprinted with permission from the August 1991 issue of Iron Game History.

The orchestra starts to play. The curtain is going up and a woman with a golden coat of mail appears. She is of colossal build, a Germania, a Brunhilde. She is the Iron-Queen Katie Sandwina, the world's most powerful woman, currently amazing the audience in the Schuhmann-Theater in Frankfurt.

Experts and physicians call this "weak woman" an "incomprehensible phenomenon." Within a few minutes she makes a spiral out of a two meter-long, flat wrought-iron bar, thick as a finger. She does this with just her bare hands.

Out of an iron bar, thick as a thumb, she bends a horseshoe and tears apart the heaviest chains as if they were made of paper. She forms the pillar of a bridge on which fifty people from the audience have a walk.

What kind of strange woman is she? What made her what she is? How does she live? I pluck up my courage, arranged to meet this woman in her hotel. As a precautionary measure I am carrying some carbolic acid and bandages. Better safe than sorry . . . a woman who breaks iron like a pretzel!

"Oh, you journalists, it's impossible to escape you! The first thing you probably want to know is my age, right?"

I blush like a youth and timidly answer in the affirmative. Again she is smiling.

"If I tell you my actual age you wouldn't believe it. And if I add some years I would cheat myself."

"Honestly, I guess you to be thirty."

"Well, write it so."

"Have you been in this profession for a long time now?"

"Since my childhood, I come from an old, famous family of athletes and I've been trained from my early days on to get strong."

"I assume you have to eat a lot?"

"I wouldn't say a lot, but well. Above all, nourishing food like meat, eggs and

vegetables."

"Do you have any objections to alcohol?"

"Me? Heaven forbid! There's nothing to beat a good glass of beer or a fine bottle of wine. I think it's nonsense when athletes avoid these things. Beer and wine are part of a good digestion."

"A very discreet question, my dear madam! Are you married?"

"No, I'm not married. I'm still single but nobody dares to end this situation."

"Are you interested in men, anyway?"

"What shall I say? Men are like air to me, you can't live without them. Every now and then I breathe good fresh air, you know. I'm just a 'weak woman', after all."

"You must have travelled all around the world, right?"

"Yes, with the exception of China and Africa you can say that. My next destination is America where I stay most of the time, although it's also quite beautiful in Germany."

"How long will you still be able to practice this 'heavy' profession?"

"If all goes well—three years."

Sometimes I regret that I'm working too honestly. People always question my abilities, although at every show I allow someone to see for himself that my act isn't a fake."

"What do you think of today's women?"

"Women should do more for their personal hygiene and exercise more often, so that the new generations become a better kind of people."

"My dear madam, I'm now going to ask a most indiscreet question: Do you wear corsets, and what do you think of them?"

"No, I don't wear them. And what do I think of them? From the point of view of health, it is a most foolish thing to wear them. And, besides, a man who is embracing a woman wants to hold a supple and warm body in his hands—not a lobster!"

Keep that in mind dear ladies! I say good-bye and shake hands with the world's strongest woman. It was a very tight grip, appropriate for a Brunhilde.

other man was one of her brothers, and when and how she and Max separated from her father's circus, is unclear. Although it is a common perception that the Sandwinas came to America to work in vaudeville and became overnight sensations, the historical record tells a different story. Research indicates that the Sandwinas worked primarily in Europe during the first seven years of the twentieth century. A German poster of the Sandwinas by the Friedlander company from 1905, for example, shows Katie holding up three men and a bicycle.⁴⁴ In 1906, Edmund Desbonnet published an article on the two Sandwinas in his magazine *La Culture Physique* when they were playing in Paris. A historian of strength, Desbonnet describes in detail the 242-pound overhead lift he witnessed.⁴⁵

Rather than focusing on Katie's appearance, however, Desbonnet wrote, "It is unnecessary to add that she shouldered this weight in the German style, that is to say by rolling the bar on her belly and chest." Even so, he continued, "for a 'weak' woman, we are certainly of the opinion that this represents a rare performance!"⁴⁶

Although the Heymanns stated on the 1930 U. S. Census that they had immigrated to the United States in 1905, the earliest newspaper mention that has been found in any American paper is in March of 1908 when "The Sandwinas" show up in very small print in an ad for Chase's Polite Vaudeville, in Washington, DC.⁴⁷ They are clearly not the stars of the show. Nor are they the stars in May 1908 when they performed in Syracuse, New York, or in the ad from July 1908 for Sheedy's Theater in Newport, Rhode Island.⁴⁸ In 1909, however, the Sandwinas returned to the United States for an extended tour with Benjamin Keith's more prestigious Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit. In January and February they were playing in Sioux City, Iowa, where

Teddy was born on January 25, 1909, and in March they appeared in Anaconda, Montana; in May they stayed for several weeks in Oakland, California, and later that summer they were in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Although the Orpheum Circuit was considered a step up professionally from the small, individually owned theaters like Chase's and Sheedy's, Katie and Max were no higher in terms of their overall billing than they had been in the smaller houses. At Cedar Rapids, for example, they were billed well down on the show's list of performers as "The Sandwinas—The European Acrobats Extraordinary."⁴⁹

After this extensive run in the United States, the Sandwinas returned to Europe, turning up in Paris in 1910 and appearing at the Olympia Theater, where the finale of the act involved Katie holding three men overhead with one hand.⁵⁰ Watching their

performance one evening was circus magnate John Ringling, who along with his brothers, owned at that time both the circus that bore his family name and the Barnum and Bailey Circus, which the Ringlings had purchased in 1907.⁵¹ Starring at that time in the Ringling Circus was the impressive German troupe known as The Saxon Brothers.⁵² When Ringling saw the Sandwinas perform, he was interested because he already knew that the American public enjoyed strength acts. What he could not have predicted, however, was just how popular Katie Sandwina would become once her talents were properly packaged by publicists and once she stepped out from behind the shadow of her partners to become the central focus of the act.

Katie was not a center-ring attraction and she did not receive top billing when she and Max joined the Barnum and Bailey Circus in March of 1911. They began their run in Madison Square Garden as one of five acts performing simultaneously, all vying for recognition. After several newspapermen wanted to know more about the strongwoman, however, a decision was made to move Katie into the spotlight, and a special press event was organized for April 2, 1911 at Madison Square Garden to introduce her. When the reporters assembled that afternoon, they discovered that Fellows had arranged to have more than a dozen physicians from medical colleges and universities in and around New York City there, and the reporters then watched this group of distinguished physicians examine, weigh, and measure Sandwina. Their conclusion, as reported by Dr. Peter Anderson, was that, "In every way, according to her measurements, she is a perfect woman by all the accepted standards." The physicians reported that Katie stood 5' 9 1/4" tall, weighed 210 pounds, and had a 44 1/10" chest

measurement when inflated, a 29" waist, 43" hips, a 16 1/10" calf, and her flexed right biceps measured 14".⁵³

This public taking of measurements was not unprecedented. In a remarkably similar circumstance, Harvard professor Dudley Allen Sargent had declared the strongman Eugen Sandow to be the "most wonderful specimen of man I have ever seen."⁵⁴ Sargent was a pioneer in the science of physical anthropometry and believed that a person's health and general well-being could be ascertained by comparing their measurements to that of an ideal, and after measuring Sandow, Sargent used him as his "ideal" from that time forward. He had even created an elaborate charting system that allowed people to see how they compared to the ideal.⁵⁵



Lithograph of Sandwina troupe printed in Germany by the Adolph Friedlander company in 1905. Library of Congress.

Katie's measurements, although larger than those of the average woman's, revealed that she had an "hourglass" figure that was proportionate. And, as was hoped, the reporters left that afternoon, went back to their typewriters, and wrote sentences such as this one from the *New York World*, "The feminine Hercules has a wonderful figure, full of symmetry, and not marred by a display of muscles," and headlines like this one from the *New York Herald*, "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel. Physically Perfect, Experts Find."⁵⁶ Katie then treated the journalists and photographers to an impromptu show, lifting Max overhead several times with one hand, and then, while holding him aloft, lowered herself to the ground and rose again to a standing position. For her finale, she lifted both Max and her massive son Teddy, supporting their more than 200 pounds of total weight with only one arm.⁵⁷

The publicity bandwagon was off and running once Katie had been declared perfect. In subsequent weeks the papers never failed to mention her "perfect" measurements, and as the season wore on she was increasingly referred to as "the perfect woman."⁵⁸ The physical culture community saw in Sandwina a living example of the benefits of exercise and that, too, was exploited by the smoothly-running Sandwina publicity machine. Bernarr Macfadden featured her in *Physical Culture* magazine, for example, explaining that the ease of Teddy's birth was because Sandwina followed a physical culture life-

style, ate sparingly, avoided meat, and, theoretically, followed his principles.⁵⁹ Yet in other interviews, Sandwina told reporters that she never watched what she ate, never dieted, and "I take beer with my lunches, two or three times a day."⁶⁰ When the opera star Mary Garden, a practicing physical culturist, attended the circus in 1912, she made a special trip back stage to get exercise advice from Sandwina, because she was so interested in Sandwina's "perfect form."⁶¹

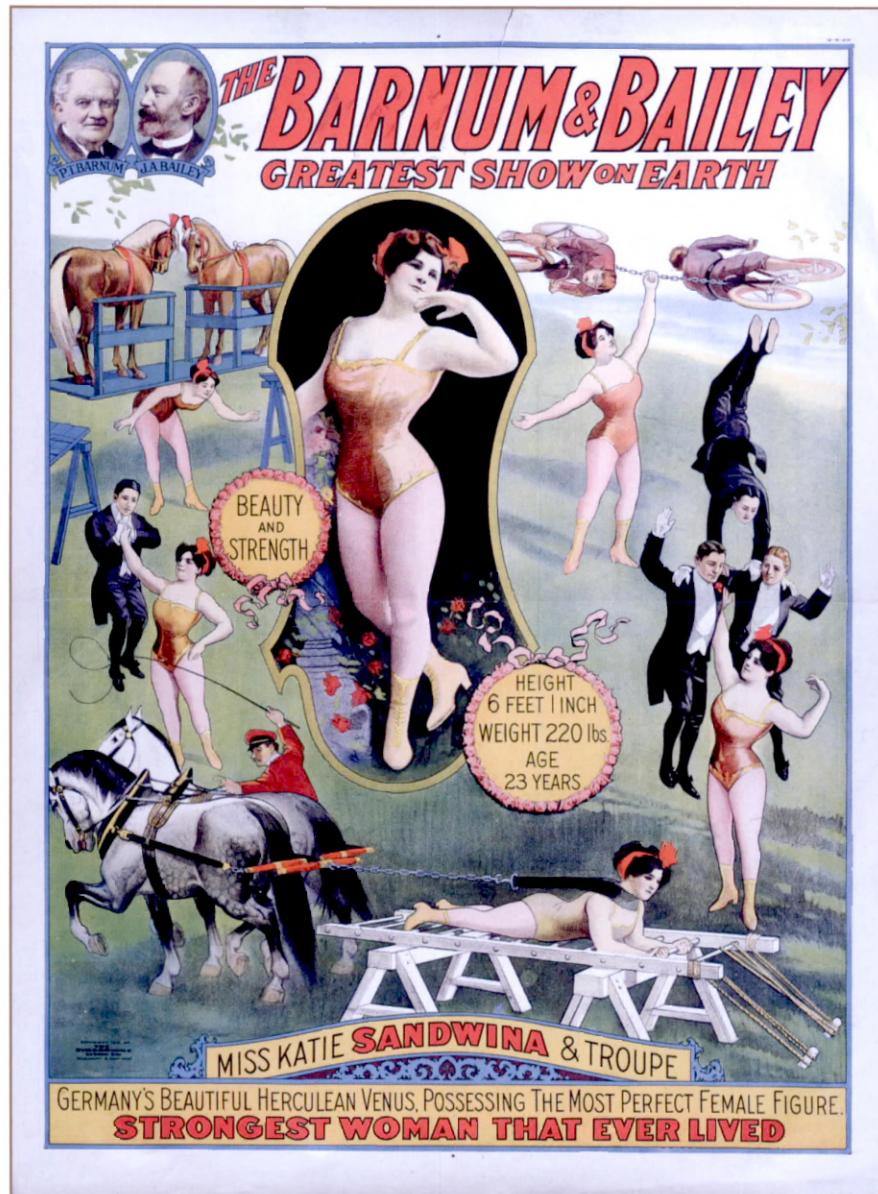
In earlier press reports, of course, Katie had told reporters she

never trained systematically and did only a little light dumbbell work in the mornings to keep herself supple. Whatever the truth was—and circus press agents, like pro wrestling promoters, were not averse to stretching the truth—by the end of the 1911 season, a combination of the Barnum show's publicity machine and Katie's unique gifts had turned her into a bona fide star. In the press clipping book kept by the Barnum and Bailey for the 1911 season, her presence in the show was remarked upon repeatedly, and was cited as one of the main reasons the circus sold out in city after city that summer. Katie and Max were brought back for the 1912 season, and a full-color poster was commissioned—a poster with text clearly written by a publicist. Katie was 28 in 1912, not 23 as the poster suggests; and if we are to believe Dr. Anderson and his colleagues, she was at most 5' 10" and not 6' 1" as the poster claims.⁶²

The focus of this piece is narrow because the story of Katie Sandwina is still being "unpacked." Her best lifts are not listed, for example, because there is such controversy over what she actually lifted and the manner in which she lifted it. Nor does this article examine the story of her death from cancer in 1952, the café/tavern she ran in Queens, New York, in the late 1940s, her work in the WPA Circus during the 1930s, or the birth of her second son Alfred in 1918—a birth her descendants say occurred during a civil disturbance in Istanbul that forced her to crawl under barbed wire fences to reach a hospital only

to learn that the hospital was full, whereupon she gave birth on the floor.⁶³

What is most fascinating about Sandwina, besides the colorful life she led, is how this performer—who had been working for nearly a decade—suddenly created a new identity. Her metamorphosis into a goddess of beauty who regularly sold out the Barnum and Bailey Circus was the most important transformation of her life. But it was not to be her last. Janet Davis and other historians have demonstrated that popular amusements matter and that the circus



In 1912 Katie got her own poster on Barnum and Bailey. She was not only the "most perfect female figure," she was also the "strongest woman that ever lived." Image from John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals collection.

and vaudeville were powerful transmitters of culture which helped to assimilate immigrants into the American experience. It also seems clear that the circus empowered people, helped to challenge the prevailing social mores and conventions, and opened people's eyes to new possibilities. Kate Carew certainly believed that to be the case. In closing her article on Sandwina, she admonished all women: "If there's a moral to the story of Katie Sandwina, it's that the rest of womankind—ye wives of wealth and fashion—should try to emulate this goddess of the sawdust, this fearless mother, this beautiful friend."⁶⁴ BW

Dr. Janice Todd, once called the woman's strongest woman, is a professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas at Austin. With her husband she founded the H. J. Luther Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, the largest archive in the world devoted to the study of physical fitness, resistance training, and alternative medicine.

Endnotes

1. Born Mary Williams in Oakland, California, in 1869, she took the name of Kate Carew when she began work at the *San Francisco Examiner*. She joined the staff of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1890 and later worked for *The Tatler* in London and the *New York Tribune*. She died in 1960. For additional information on Carew see: <www.twainquotes.com/interviews/confessions.html>.

2. Kate Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strong Woman' Tells Kate Carew—This Young Goddess of the Tan Bark, Who Tosses Her Husband About as She Would a Feather, Explains How She Came By Her Strength," *New York American*, April 16, 1911, 2-M.

3. See, for example, "This Woman Has Strength of Ten Men," *The Fresno Morning Republican*, September 10, 1912, n.p. at <www.newspaperarchives.com>. See also: "Fyles Letter," *Montreal Star*, April 4, 1911; and Charles Eldot, "Last Week of the Circus," *North Side News*, 4-18, Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida.

4. David P. Willoughby, "The Muscular Strength of Women as Compared with Men . . . With Special Reference to the Feats of Katie Sandwina," *Skill*, December 1967, 4-5; John D. Fair, "Kati Sandwina: Hercules Can Be A Lady," *Iron Game History*, December 2005, 4-7; Jan Todd, "Bring on the Amazons: An Evolutionary History," *Picturing the Modern Amazon* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 48-61. In 1960, *Skill* magazine published short pieces on Sandwina from Leo Gaudreau, Siegmund Klein, Tromp Van Diggelen, Gerard Nisivoccia, and Peary Rader in an article entitled, "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman? Skill's Search for the Truth," *Skill* (n.m.: 1960), 13-17; partially-dated clipping, Coulter Strongwoman File, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. See also Robert J. Devany, "Stars of the Big Top: Katie Sandwina," *Muscle Power*, 3, (July 1947), 16-17; Ernest Edwin Coffin, "A Feminine Hercules," *New Physical Culture*, March 1948, 24-25, 69; and Robert Nealy, "The Feminine Sandow: Katie Sandwina," *Iron Man*, January 1961, 20-21, 46.

5. The best examples of the debate over Sandwina's strength can be seen in Willoughby, "Muscular Strength of Women," and in Gaudreau, et. al., "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman," above. Original copies of Sandwina's Barnum and Bailey poster can be seen at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin and the Ringling Museum.

6. In her article, Carew states that her interview was set up by a Mr. Fellows, who escorted her behind stage, set up the interview with the Sandwinas, and then took her to a special box seat to watch the show. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strong Woman'."

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 96. See also: Thomas Beer, *The Mauve*

Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century, (New York, Carol & Graf, 1997 [1926]).

10. Interview by the author with Patricia Galli, June 6, 1999. Galli separated from Alfred in 1952, the year of Katie's death. He worked as a stage and film actor under the names Al Sander(s).

11. Ottley Coulter to David Willoughby, undated letter, Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

12. Ottley Coulter to Jack Kent, October 30, 1956, Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

13. See: Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (University of Illinois Press: 2005), for an excellent discussion of the New Woman in early twentieth century America.

14. The most famous strongwoman working in America prior to Sandwina was Josephine Blatt who appeared under the stage name Minerva. See: Jan Todd, "The Mystery of Minerva," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture*, April 1990, 14-17.

15. William Inglis, "Here's the Circus," *Harper's Weekly*, April 1911. Clipping, typescript, Todd Sandwina File, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

16. "Circus Boasts its Beauties," N.P. 1912. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

17. Franklin Fyles, "Gotham's Spring Season Brings Novelties," April 3, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

18. Margaret Mooers Marshall, "Katie Sandwina, Her Husband and Baby," Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

19. Charles Eldot, "Last Week of Circus," *North Side News*, April, 18, 1912. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

20. Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 83. See also: Marcy Murray, "Strong Women and Cross-Dressed Men: Representations of Gender by Circus Performers During the Golden Age of the American Circus, 1860-1930," *Bandwagon*, May-June 2004: 18-23.

21. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strongwoman,'" p. 2-M.

22. Although the Barnum and Bailey poster showing Katie's act lists her height at 6' 1" and her weight at 220, Katie was formally weighed and measured by a team of physicians and physical culturists shortly after she opened at the Garden and found to be 5' 9 1/4" in height. Edmund Desbonnet lists her height in *Les Rois de la Force*, as 1 meter, 80 centimeters which converts to 5' 9.5". See: "Frau Sandwina and Her Muscles," *Telegraph*, April 9, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Scrapbook at Ringling Museum for more information on her measurements in 1911. Katie always performed in tightly laced boots with two-inch heels and piled her thick hair on the top of her head to accentuate her height. Max claimed in his reminiscence of his life with Katie (written after her death) that he was 5' 10" tall. Max Heymann, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," *American Weekly*, July 5, 1943. Daughter-in-law Patricia Galli remembers him as no more than 5' 3".

23. Janet Davis argues that the circus capitalized on the audience's natural curiosity about the bodily logistics of sexual activities between mismatched performers. It was common for press agents to report the "marriage" of skeleton men with fat women or dwarves paired with giants as a way to hype the gate. Davis, *Circus Age*, 120. See also: Murray, "Strong Women and Cross-Dressed Men," 18-23. Additional insights on the lives of circus performers can be found in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

24. "Circus Performers Dance While Executing Dexterous Ring Feats," *New York Evening Journal*, March 29, 1912.

25. "Happy Family Ruled by Giantess Makes Anti-Suffragists Tremble," *American*, April 10, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

26. It is possible that Sandwina and her circus friends involved themselves in the Suffrage Movement purely for publicity purposes, attempting to strike a chord with yet another group of possible ticket buyers. One bit of evidence to argue against this having the sanction of the Barnum show's management, however, is that in 1911 one of



Sandwina was a little more demure in this picture from the same 1912 photo shoot with Fred Glasier. Image courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Glasier Glass Plate Negative Collection.

the most talked about features of the show was the clowns' routine in which suffragettes were arrested by police and wrestled into small paddy wagons. "Circus Dropped for Today," *Press*, April 3, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

27. For a discussion of "true womanhood" see: Francis B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 4-9; and Barbara Welter's classic work which introduced the term "true woman," to feminist studies, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

28. Although Max Heymann claimed that Katie returned to work just four days after giving birth, in his 1953 *American Weekly* tribute to her: "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," earlier articles suggest she took two weeks to recover from Teddy's birth. See, for example.

"This Woman is a Sandow," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, July 12, 1911.

29. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strong Woman,'" 2-M. According to Sandwina, Teddy ate an orange, two eggs, three rolls and several glasses of milk at breakfast and then would "holler for more." As an adult, Teddy became the heavyweight boxing champion of Europe and had 68 professional fights.

30. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strong Woman,'" 2-M.

31. See Patricia A. Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Exercise and Doctors in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 149-156, for an excellent discussion of the role of eugenics in early-twentieth-century women's lives.

32. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strongwoman,'" 2-M.

33. The story of Katie's early life (with differing details) can be found in: Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strongwoman,'" Ernest Edwin Coffin, "Strongest Woman on Earth: A Biographical Sketch of Katie Sandwina," *Your Physique*, August-September 1942, 11; Robert J. Devenney, "Stars of the Big Top: Katie Sandwina," *Muscle Power*, July 1947, 16-17; Barbara Ray, "Sandwina: The Strong Name," May 1990, 1-4; and in Desbonnet, "Brumbach Family," *Les Rois de la Force*, (Paris: Librairie Berger-Levrault/Librairie Athletique, 1911), 227-8. The reference to her mother's maiden name is from her obituary in *Variety* on January 23, 1952.

34. Katie claimed she had only fourteen siblings in: "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength," undated clipping in Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. Barbara Ray who had done a genealogical study of the family believes Katie was born second, and was the eldest daughter. Most newspaper accounts, such as Carew's, credit Johanna with sixteen children. See also: "Strong Woman Has Figure of Gladiator," *World*, April 3, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

35. "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel, Physically Perfect, Experts Find," *Herald*, April 3, 1911. Barnum and Bailey Scrapbook, Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida.

36. Katie's sister Barbara (Babette) Brumbach who appeared with Marie, in an act called the Braselley Duo, was reportedly stronger than Katie—but being shorter at approximately the same weight—had a less pleasing physique. Desbonnet, "Une Famille d'Athletes," *La Culture Physique*, April 1, 1910, 197-199. Special thanks to David Chapman for translation assistance. See also: *Femme Muscleania* No. 10, From the Orrin J. Heller Collection (Privately published anthology), 22-23. Todd Sandwina file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection; and: "The Sister to Sandwina," *Skill*, (undated clipping in: *Femme Muscleania* No. 10, From the Orrin J. Heller Collection (Privately published anthology), 42).

37. H. L. Lepworth, "Letter to the Editor: A Famous Woman Physical Culture Exponent," Clipping from *Physical Culture*, no date. Coulter Strongwoman scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection.

38. "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength," undated clipping in Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection.

39. Her obituary reports that she developed into a "child acrobat and trapeze artist with the Sandwina Circus," operated by her father. "Katie Sandwina, 68, Circus Performer," *N.P.N.D.*, obituary, 1952. Sandwina clipping file, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection. No information on the lifting records mentioned by Lepworth has been found.

40. The improbable tale that he and Katie fell in love and eloped on the day they met is told in Jack Ross, "The Strongest Woman Who Ever Lived," *Man to Man*, May 1953, 48; and in Max Heyman with William Asher, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman," *American Weekly*, July, 5 1953.

41. Heymann, "I Married the World's Strongest Woman."

42. Leo Gaudreau, "Katie Sandwina: The World's Strongest Woman?? Skill's Search for the Truth," *Skill* March & April 1961, 13. The story is told, however, in an article originally published in 1947 by Sidney Fields, "Hercules Can Be a Lady," *New York Mirror*, December 15, 1947. That article was reprinted with an introduction by John Fair in *Iron Game History* 9 (December 2005): 4-7.

43. 1930 United States Federal Census, available at <Ancestry.com>.

44. This poster, by Friedlander, is located in the Library of Congress.

45. The author would like to thank David Chapman for his assistance in translating this article. Serrano (pseud. for Edmund Desbonnet), "The Sandwinas," *La Culture Physique*, April 1906, 445-6.

46. Serrano (pseud. for Edmund Desbonnet), "The Sandwinas," *La Culture Physique*, April 1906, 445-6. At that time some French lifters "cleaned" the barbell to their shoulders in one quick motion, while most German lifters raised the bar to the shoulders by pulling it to the waistline and then either rolling or hitching the bar to the shoulders.

47. "Chase's Polite Vaudeville," Advertisement. *The Washington Post* March 1, 1908, 3. See also: "Chase's Polite Vaudeville," Advertisement. *The Washington Post* March 7, 1908, p. 4. Advertisement, *The Post Standard*, May 2, 1908, and "The Grand, Keith's Vaudeville," Advertisement, *Syracuse Herald*, May 3, 1908, 15.

48. "Sheedy's Theater," Advertisement. *The News*—Newport, Rhode Island, July 27, 1908.

49. "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *The Anaconda Standard*, March, 11 1909, 11; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement. *Oakland Tribune*, April 25, 1909, p. 7; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement, *Oakland Tribune*, April 26, 1909, 16; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement. *Oakland Tribune*, May 2, 1909, 4; "Orpheum Theater," Advertisement. *Oakland Tribune* May, 7 1909, n.p. See "Large Crowds Enjoy Circus," *The Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, July 21, 1911, 7 for the description of Teddy's birth in February of 1909.

50. Leon See, "Une Famille d'Athletes," *La Culture Physique*, April 1 1910, 197-199. See also: "Hercules Can be a Lady." *Iron Game History*, December 2005, 4-7.

51. Freeman Hubbard, *Great Days of the Circus*, (New York: American Heritage, Harper and Row): 71.

52. "Strong Men at the Circus: The Saxon Brothers Show Athletes Feats in Weight Lifting," *New York Times*, April 12, 1909.

53. "Frau Sandwina Perfect Woman," *Telegraph*, April 3, 1911; "Frau Sandwina Circus Marvel, Physically Perfect, Experts Find." *New York Herald*, April 3, 1911. "Lifts Husband and Son: Sandwina of the Circus Does it With One hand," *New York Tribune*, April 3, 1911.

54. Quoted in G. Mercer Adam, ed., *Sandow's System of Physical Training*, (New York, G. Selwin Tate, 1894), 121.

55. For more information on Sargent and his ideas see: Carolyn de la Pena, "Dudley Allen Sargent, Health Machines and the Energized Male Body," *Iron Game History*, October 2003, 3-19.

56. "Strong Woman Has Figure of a Gladiator," *New York World*, April 3, 1911; "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel. Physically Perfect, Experts Find," *New York Herald*, April 3, 1911.

57. "Frau Sandwina, Circus Marvel," Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

58. "Frau Sandwina Perfect Woman: Exhibition of Form Divine," *Telegraph*, April 3, 1911, and "Frau Sandwina and Her Muscles: Strong Woman of the Circus Proves One of the Most Sensational and Interesting Features," *Telegraph*, April 9, 1911, in Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

59. "A Remarkable Mother," *Physical Culture*, Coulter Strongwoman Scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection.

60. "Frau Sandwina Circus Marvel" and "She Tosses Husband About Like Biscuit, Frau Sandwina is a Giantess in Strength." Undated clipping, Coulter Strongwoman Scrapbook, Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection.

61. "Miss Garden Sees Her First Circus: Diva Deeply Interested in All She Sees on Visit to Madison Square Garden," *Herald*, March 28, 1912. Barnum and Bailey Route and Clipping Book for 1911, Ringling Museum.

62. Black and white copies of the poster have appeared frequently in muscle magazine coverage of Sandwina. It can also be seen in David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 533.

63. Katie's bar was in the Ridgewood neighborhood of Queens, close to the Brooklyn-Queens border. Interview with Patricia Galli, June 6, 1999.

64. Carew, "Barnum and Bailey's 'Strong Woman.'"



Sandwina was still formidable when she worked Frank Wirth dates in 1938.
John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

Kati Sandwina “Hercules Can Be a Lady”

by John D. Fair

This article originally appeared in the December, 2005 issue of Iron Game History.

Few women of strength have attained the fame of Catherine (Kati) Brumbach Heymann. Known to the public as “Sandwina,” a distaff derivative of “Sandow.” Jan Todd describes her as one of the “super-stars” of professional strongwomen in an essay entitled “Bring on the Amazons.” Kati was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1884, one of the sixteen children of Phillippe and Johanna Brumbach, and began performing in the family-run circus at age two. As a teenager she was taking on all challengers in wrestling, her father offering a handsome prize to anyone who could defeat her. Gracefully proportioned, Kati eventually earned the reputation as a touring performer of “Europe’s Queen of Strength, Beauty and Dexterity.”

Coming to the United States in 1908, she joined the prestigious Keith’s Orpheum Vaudeville circuit the next year and then became a center ring attraction for the Barnum and Bailey Circus. For the next three decades, according to Todd, she sometimes earned as much as \$1,500 a week. Her feats of strength were remarkable. An unsigned 1946 article in *Strength & Health*, possibly authored by Ray Van Cleef, credits her with a 264 pound continental jerk, a right hand continental jerk of 176 pounds, and a press in excess of 200 pounds on numerous occasions. As a performer she engaged in iron-bending chain-breaking and, much in the manner of Paul Anderson and other showmen, executed spectacular



Kati continued to twist iron bars until the end of her life. This photo was most likely taken during her time on the WPA Circus in the mid-1930s. Pfening Archives.

feats of strength involving human beings on stage. So awesome was this strongwoman that Siegmund Breitbart, who billed himself as “the strongest man in the world” in the 1920s, occasionally cancelled or postponed engagements rather than jeopardize his reputation by appearing in the same city when she was performing.

About 1900 Kati married Max Heymann, an acrobat of considerable repute. They often performed together in an act in which Kati would lift Max through the manual of arms positions, with Max being the rifle. Their two sons, Theodore and Alfred, inherited their mother’s physical endowments. Theodore (1909-1997) also adopted his mother’s stage name and, as Teddy Sandwina, became a professional boxer of note from 1926 to 1932. In later years Kati and Max operated a neighborhood tavern in Ridgewood, New Jersey. She died of cancer on January 21, 1952.

The following article by Sidney Fields appeared in the *New York Mirror* on December 15, 1947. It is an endearing portrait of Kati and Max’s relationship. With all due allowance for possible error or exaggeration (by interviewer or interviewee), its believability stems from what we already know about Kati’s prodigious strength. Most importantly, the article reveals the human side of one of the most important icons of the iron game. For what is often missing in iron game history, amidst a profusion of facts and figures on the greats of the game, not to mention hero worship, is information on the quality of their life experiences. Much as Harry Paschall once entertained and delighted us with his Bosco cartoons, this article (replete with German accents) recaptures a bit of the afterglow of ethnic America during the strongman era.

“Hercules Can Be a Lady”

by Sidney Fields

Before Kati wrinkled the bar in the picture at left*, it was six feet long. It’s one and a half inches wide and a quarter of an inch thick.* Kati’s father ran a little circus back in Germany. He was a strongman, too. He had such a big hand you could put a half-dollar through his wedding ring. But Max says Kati is even stronger than her father was.

“Vy, she’s de strongest vooman ever was lifting.”

Max was an acrobat out of work 45 years ago when he saw Kati at the circus. Her father had just finished announcing that he’d give 1,000 marks [other accounts say 100 marks] to anyone who could wrestle with Kati and win. . . .

“I show him my muscles,” Max recalls, “an dey ahksept me und I wrestle



Kati dwarfed her husband Max Heymann in this early publicity photo. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

mit Kati. She picks me up vuns und trows me on de floor and I say Kati I luv you. Will you marry me?"

"A regular blitzkrieg," Kati smiles proudly. "I say ja und ve get married und run away to Norvay. But my vater he tells de police dot Max runs avay mit a daughter vot is a minor und we hav to go to da station haus. But Max he vaves de license und ve go home, und vater forgives everything und alles is hutsy tutsy."

They put together their own act and Kati would lift three men way up with one hand with Max on top. John Ringling saw them in Paris and hired them. . . .

"Ve come to de Younited Shtates," says Papa, "and Mama is de big attracshun frum de show. Ven de circus zeesun is over ve are in vaudeville. In Sioux City Teddy our first son ist born. Mama gifs a performance dot same night, den she goes to hav da baby. Teddy Roosevelt vot is a great admirrer frum Mama he iss de godvater."

They trouped all over the world with their act. In 1911 Kati established the world's record for weight lifting by raising a two-handed 300-pound barbell. That was official. Papa says unofficially she lifts a 312.5-pound barbell.

Son Teddy became a boxer, had 84 fights, won 60 by kayos. Max Schmeling was once his sparring partner. Ted works around the bar and contributes to Mama's regular Saturday night show with a burlesque of his own on love, dancing, fighters and fight managers. His act is called "I am a Dope." The Sandwinas' second son Alfred spent five years in the Air Corps and is now a struggling young singer and actor.

When Mama isn't weight-lifting or bending iron, she throws Papa around, all 155 pounds of him, or she lets him bang a 200-pound



One of Sandwina's signature moves was to hoist a man above her head with one arm. The victim is probably her husband Max Heymann.

apologize und now dey are well behaved."

One afternoon, a bruiser walked in and after berating everyone in sight, started for Papa. That always ends Mama's quiet patience. She didn't bother to yell, "Papa, open da door." She floored the bruiser with one punch for the whole count and gave him a thorough lesson as she tossed him out. And the two cops standing right outside the door, twirling their nightclubs, cautioned Kati as they always do . . . "Mama, don't hit him too hard!" **BW**



As part of her act on the WPA Circus in 1935 Kati allowed two men with sledge hammers to pound on an anvil resting on her thighs while she lay on a bed of nails. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

anvil on her stomach while she lies bare back on a bed of nails. That's the easy life that Kati retired to from the circus five years ago. . . .

"Only ve find out it iss not so easy. Ven it starts here de business de ferst year it iss very tough. Evvery odder day I haf to yell, 'Papa, open da door.' Ve leave a tree-ring circus for a five-ring show."

"But now," Papa smiles contentedly, "dey are al gentlemens. Mama she talks to dem nice. 'Go home,' she says. 'No more drinks for you.' Dey go. Ven dey come back de next day dey put dere head in da door ferst und ask, 'Can I come in, Kati?'"

Kati generally sits in the neat little restaurant in the rear and talks to the neighbors. Papa and Ted tend bar and serve. As soon as anyone starts getting troublesome, Papa always warns . . . "You better scamp or Mama comes in."

One day Mama was sitting in the restaurant when three of the boys got noisy at once. They were trying Papa's patience by complaining about everything from the head on the beer to the free lunch. It started to look like trouble. Mama got up, yelled, "Papa open da door," and tossed them out one by one. . . .

"Und de next dey stick der head in und

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Endnotes

"Female Athletic Combatants in Old Times," Part III, <<http://www.fscclub.com/thoughts/zhened-old3-e.shtml>>

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"Super-Woman," *Strength & Health*, March, 1946, 15 and 38.

"Teddy Sandwina," viewed at: <www.jewsinsports.org/pro-file.asp?sport=boxing&ID=275>

Todd, Jan, "Bring on the Amazons: An Evolutionary History" *Picturing the Modern Amazon* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 48-61.

**The photo referred to showed Sandwina bending a length of iron. It is similar to the photo of her twisting iron in this article, although it was taken later in her life.*

A Circus Rider Is Born

Introducing May Wirth

The following article is based on a manuscript found at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota. The source of the introductory paragraphs is not known, but it can be assumed that the bulk of the remainder of the material is from May Wirth herself since most of it is written in the first person.

On occasion, the voice abruptly changes from first to third person, and in places it appears that Stella Martin St. Leon, her stepsister, wrote the text. Obvious errors in spelling, names, and punctuation have been corrected, but every effort to retain the original intent has been made. For additional reading, readers are directed to "May Wirth, an Unbelievable Lady Bareback Rider," by Mark St. Leon, Bandwagon, May-June 1990; and his Circus in Australia: May Wirth, the Bareback Queen.

On a bright sunny morning in June, a little baby girl saw the light of day in a very small town called Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia. That child was named May and up until the ripe old age of three years she played like a baby. Her father [her birth father John Edward Despoges with the professional name of Johnny Zinga] then decided it was time to start training her for a future. The first rudiments of a circus performer are to learn to be a contortionist and from there to be an acrobat, then wire walking, aerial work and so on. In between she also learned ballet. All through this training, "Young May" as she was called by all her relations, was crazy about ponies and horses and wanted, above all else, to become a rider, so one early morning, while helping her Uncle Philip [her adoptive uncle, Phil Wirth] train and break in his liberty horses, he said, "May, how would you like to learn to ride?" Well, she thought, that was the happiest day of her life. Her uncle ordered the groom to bring in a little pony called Silver Queen. It was a beautiful little pony, creamy colored dappled with a silver mane and tail and a big broad back. From that morning on Young May became a rider. She was then ten years of age, a real veteran of the circus and doing three numbers in the program,

namely, a contortion act, an acrobatic act and a wire act and for good old measure went in the good old leaps with all the gang. Gee, that was lots of fun when every performer tried to out-do the other in turning somersaults over many horses, camels and elephants and sometimes not making the big jump but landing on a camel's back and the camel getting scared to death breaking up the line and running around the ring out into the hippodrome track with the leaper still on its back and the camel still moving. And that is the early beginning of May Wirth.

May Learns to Ride

In young May's early training days she was a very apt pupil and no matter what was taught her she would put her whole heart and soul into it. Her father [Despoges] taught her contortion work and tumbling and her mother [her birth mother Dezeppo Marie Despoges Zinga nee Beaumont] taught her ballet and wire work. Later her Uncle Philip Wirth took her in hand and taught her to ride. He was a wonderful horse trainer and had May with him all the time. He was breaking in different horse acts, practicing from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. daily. During his horse-breaking period he would bring out the pony, Silver Queen, which he had broken in for rosin back, and May would ride and ride until the pony was worn out. Uncle Philip taught her to do jerks, flip-flaps and feet jumps from the ground. There were also three boy

cousins, George, Alex and Eddie, who were being taught to ride too, so Uncle Philip put an act together with all the kids and called it the "Children's Circus." That same act was performed in America years later with May Wirth, Phil and the Wirth family.

John Cooke Finishes May In Her Riding

John Welby Cooke was married to Edith Wirth, niece of the Wirth brothers. When they were married he took his bride to the Hamilton Circus in India and they stopped there until their baby



Little May Martin before she adopted the Wirth surname balancing on the forearm of her adoptive father Jack Martin, the husband of Marizles (Rill) Wirth Martin. The Martins adopted Little May from her birth mother in 1901. Photo circa 1902. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

was born. Edith then brought her son back to Australia because the climate in India was too much for the baby. John stayed in India for another year and then he came out to join his family in Australia and the Wirth Circus. John and his brother Clarence were wonderful bareback [riders]. I don't think I have ever seen such a jockey rider so graceful and so assured. After John was with the show for three months he discovered May, who was just a small fry but full of ambition. John took her in hand and for three years worked very hard with May, teaching her such tricks as somersaults, backward riding and the very difficult trick known as the forward somersault feet to feet. This feat was never performed by any other woman, but May mastered this and became the only woman to accomplish this trick. John was very proud of May and after they had made such a success in America they went back to England and returned to Australia five years later. In Australia they took the engagement with the Wirth Bros. Shows for one year. John was their ringmaster during that time. May asked him if he would teach her his famous jump up from the ground to the horse's back with her feet encased in round market baskets. He had these baskets made and they went to work, John teaching and May learning how this trick was done. He did this wonderful trick while his finish would be jumping over a bar which made the horse that much higher. John taught May to do this trick in six months and when they returned to America it was something new. Again May was doing something that no other girl had ever done before and John was a wonderful teacher and May was a good pupil.

May's Coming to America

On our first arrival in America we landed in New York not knowing a soul and at the wrong time of the year. All the circuses were out on the road. Before Mother left Australia she had the address of a professional boarding house which was located on 42nd Street off Broadway which was called Moraes's. The Lyric Theatre now stands there. Forty-Second Street in those days was a very gay and lively street to us in a very high class way, not the Coney Island it is today. We used to take our chairs out on the sidewalk at night after dinner and have lots of fun and enjoyment just watching the big crowds going into the New Amsterdam Theatre. The lovely Ziegfeld Follies were something to see and the Midnight Follies of those days would put the night clubs of today way down the back yard. Before we left Australia, lots of new acts from the U.S.A. had come out to the Wirth Bros. Circus and among them was Ouika Meers. In America, Rose and Ouika Meers was quite a famous sister riding act with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Ouika was to replace me in the Wirth show. Before we sailed, Ouika gave



Little May Martin in a studio portrait doing a split from her contortion act, date unknown. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

mother the address of Miss Josie DeMott who had been America's only somersault rider in her day. She had married and being very well off, had retired from show business and lived in Cincinnati, Ohio for thirteen years. After this long retirement she decided to go back again and be a circus rider. She retired her riding pad, and returned riding bareback which is quite a difficult feat. She had a very beautiful large estate in Hempstead, Long Island and it was at this home that we met Josie. Ouika told mother that if Josie had a horse, she would surely let May have it. Mother wrote Josie for an appointment and got an invitation to come out to her home and spend a little time with her, which we did. It was very lovely out in Hempstead but we were lonesome at first. Josie had a lake which was full of turtles but we went in swimming just the same. She also had a big barn where she kept three horses, a pony, a trap and the horse feed. She built a ring by the lake and it was very picturesque. On Saturdays, Josie used to take us into the town of Hempstead to do the marketing for the week and we would stay and see the one and only picture show. We sure ran wild every weekend. After we had been at Josie's for about three weeks and Josie had seen me ride, mother thought she'd ask her about selling one of her horses. Of course, I had ridden all three of them and had picked out the one and only Joe horse. From the first moment I first stood on

Joe's back, I knew he was the horse for me. To me he had the perfect gait. He was rather tall, stood 16 1/2 hands, was a beautiful dapple gray and was six years old. He had more than his share of spirits and was very high strung, but he had a wonderful love for women and did not like men. I think the reason for this is that every time he was left in a man's care, he was ill treated. For instance, there was a time that Josie had a bad accident and had to leave the show. Her brother, Willie DeMott, was on the same show and he was a very good bareback rider. Josie thought the best one to leave her horse with would be her brother. It was the worst thing she could have done. Willie was very quick tempered and had no patience where horses were concerned. One day he took Joe into practice. It was a very hot day and Willie was out of sorts. He started doing backs on Joe and landing too heavy he hurt his back, so the horse, in order to ease the weight, humped Willie so high that he almost



Studio portrait of the Martins in typical Victorian clothes. From left, May Martin, Marizles (Rill) Wirth Martin, and Stella Martin. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

overturned. The more Willie would do backs, the higher Joe would hump until Willie got so mad that he fell down on Joe's neck and bit his ear. That was the cue for Joe. He ran like a mad horse around and around the ring until Willie had to take him out. He had used the whip on him quite a bit and from that day on Joe and Willie were the worst enemies. When Josie returned to the show, Joe horse was known as the worst outlaw on the lot. He was chained down by all four legs and had a muzzle on his mouth. When Josie saw him she cried and went over and untied him immediately. While she was doing this one of the grooms called out to her to keep away from him if she did not want her head kicked off. Josie said this horse would not harm anyone if he was treated right and believe it or not, Joe whinnied and kissed her all over her face. You see, Joe had always had kindness from women. Josie originally got Joe from the Borden Milk Co. and then took him out on her estate to break him for a ring horse. Although Josie had retired from show business she still broke in ring horses so that when I came on the scene and saw and rode Joe after two weeks, nothing would do but that I had to have him. It was just like second nature for me to do every trick I had ever learned on him with all the ease in the world. His gait was perfect and he and I matched up beautifully. I had learned to ride on a horse called Cooper in Australia and he really was a bad horse and when I got on Joe it was like riding in the clouds. We were with Josie about six weeks when mother thought it was about time to ask her if she would sell Joe. Of course, she played a little hard to get at first and wanted to think it over for a few days, which she did, and came right out with, "If you want Joe horse you will have to pay real money for him." Mother, in turn, asked what she meant by "real money." I can see Josie now, standing down by the ring with mother. Josie was 4' 8½" and mother, 5' 2½" sort of looking down



May and her adoptive mother Rill Martin in front of her horse Cooper on the back lot of the Wirth Circus in Australia in 1911. Rill's wardrobe included a wig and 18th century military uniform that she continued to wear on the Barnum and Bailey Circus in 1912 and 1913. Note May's long hair; in America it was always bobbed. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.



May's act on Barnum and Bailey in 1912 utilized twenty-six riders in Hussar uniforms. In this photograph from the same year May appeared in the street parade in her Hussar uniform leading the other twenty-six. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

on Josie while Josie stuck her little turned-up nose at mother and said, "I want one thousand dollars." For a minute it took mother's breath away because where we come from a thousand dollars was a great deal of money, especially for a circus ring horse. I guess Josie knew we needed a horse and especially this one, so she stuck to her price and mother could take him or leave him, so, to my delight, she took him. Right after that we went to Spain on a three months engagement. Joe and I were like one. When I would be on his back he would know the very mood I was in through the feeling in my feet, and when the band struck up and the bright spotlight went on, I'd be sitting on Joe's back waiting for the curtains to be drawn. Joe would prick his pretty ears and all his nervousness would be gone. His beautiful black eyes shining all set to walk into the ring carrying his Queen to higher success. We were very proud of each other. Joe was almost human when he was in front of an audience. He would show off just as if he knew that was the right thing to do. What a horse Joe was and when he died in 1923, I was very heartbroken. We had many other horses—25 in all—but none ever came up to Joe's standard.

[In her autobiography, *The Circus Lady*, Josephine DeMott Robinson reprinted a letter she received from Marizles Wirth, May's adoptive mother, in which she reported the death of May's horse: "Joe died last night at eight-fifteen, and he fought to the last. Talk about a soldier. Joe certainly was one. He tried so hard to live. The heat overcame him yesterday. He ate nothing but an orange. You know he was always awfully fond of oranges, always had a couple every night just before being put into the tract, and some during the day. I never thought any of us, even May, would feel the parting so much. The Vet did all he could for him, and one of my grooms never left him for a minute. When May called him, 'Come, Joe darling' he got up straight away, but he as too weak to stand and fell again.

"We had him buried, not a hair was taken from him, except a few strands to make May a bracelet. Poor May just came from the stable

tent crying. She said it was awful not to see him over there. She loved him so much."

After we bought Joe and I had got my act set, mother got in touch with Mr. John Ringling to come out to Josie's to see me ride. The year before, my Uncle George Wirth had been in America and had met John Ringling and had told him he had a niece back in Australia who, he thought, would fit into his show. Mr. Ringling had suggested that Uncle George send me to America. So when mother invited him out to see me ride, there was quite some excitement. The night before he was to come out it had rained quite heavily and as the ring was outdoors, it was nothing less than a mud puddle the next day. For me to have to give my first audition for the biggest show on earth was something of a nerve-wracking business for mother but for me it was just another bad ring and I would make the best of it. When you're only fourteen [May was seventeen] years of age, one is unconscious of many things and mud or no mud, I was determined to show Mr. John I could be a bad ring rider as well as a good ring rider and most all rings under a tent are bad anyway. Mother made me a brand new dress and I had bobbed hair and wore a big pink bow on the top of my head, which came to be known almost as well as myself. I went through my act for Mr. John and then came to the part of the act when I had to do my forward

somersault which is a difficult trick for a man or woman to do. I was credited with being the only woman ever to attempt this very dangerous trick and the only lady rider ever to do it successfully. My Uncle George Wirth had told John Ringling about me doing this trick but John did not believe it, so when I did it and, unfortunately, fell off the horse outside the ring right at John Ringling's feet, he was frightened half to death but before he could look twice, I was up and back on the horse with Mr. John putting up all kinds of protests for me not to try and do the forward again in such a bad ring. But once back on Joe horse, I was deaf to all protestations and did a perfect forward somersault. John Ringling then remarked, "I sure believe she can do a forward now."

After the auditions we all went up to the house and had afternoon tea. My sister Stella played the piano and we both sang. John immediately wanted us to go in a concert but mother had been forewarned about not going in concerts and immediately said no. Before John left to go back to New York, he had engaged us for the opening in the old Madison Square Garden for the spring of 1912. We had three months to wait before the opening, so mother took an engagement in Spain with Chevelier Charles which was another big adventure for us. John Ringling did not want us to go as he was afraid we would not come back. While in Spain, we were in the

When May got her own poster on Barnum and Bailey in 1913 her given name was misspelled and her hair was too long. In fact, the image on the poster bears only a faint resemblance to her. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.





From left, Stella, Rill and May Wirth in wardrobe on the back lot, date unknown. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

middle of two or three revolutions in Barcelona. Our stay in Spain was not a happy one, so when we completed our three months engagement there, we came back to America to open in Madison Square Garden and what an opening Mr. Ringling had arranged to have.

The Opening in Madison Square Garden 1912

So I joined the Barnum and Bailey Circus, and what a circus it was. We had never seen anything in our lives like it. To begin with everybody knew there were five original Ringling Brothers, and when we joined the Barnum and Bailey show, there were only four living: Al Ringling, Alf T. Ringling, Charles Ringling and John Ringling. They staged a wonderful spectacular called Cleopatra. They had built a stage ranging in terraces about thirty feet above the arena, with a ramp running up to the stage, in order that Anthony and his army could drive their chariots up to the throne of Cleopatra. It was most thrilling to see. The Ringlings had the book written, but they produced it themselves. The only outside help they got was the dance director Ottokar Bartik, from the Met, and the ballet he put on was something to see. They had about 45 girls in the Garden, on the road it was cut down and quite a number of the lady performers who were fine dancers went in the ballet, and there weren't any legitimate actors to play the parts in Cleopatra

and Anthony. Eugenie Silbon of the Siegrist-Silbon flying act played Cleopatra, and Camel of the Camel bar performers played Anthony. Riders, acrobats, wire walkers and aerial performers made up the entire cast. So very different today, and if I were asked what I thought of the productions of those years and the productions of today, I'd say there is no comparison, then and now. The only thing now is the gorgeous wardrobe. Of course in Cleopatra and Anthony they had period costumes. The Ringlings went into the Garden about a week before the opening and as a rule the opening day was Good Friday, which we did not care about, because in Australia it's a very holy day and every kind of amusement is closed.

It was the press night here and the press was invited.

Mr. Ringling had an opening of twenty-six men dressed as Hussars on twenty-six beautiful cream colored horses ranging from the back door to the middle ring and I was to march through the middle of this line on Joe, led by Tommy, a little cockney from London, who in Australia, took care of young May in her earlier days in Wirth circus. He was assigned to put up May's rigging and take May home at night and put her to bed as she was only seven years of age at the time. Mother had many acts to do in the program and did not get through until almost the end of the show. When mother decided to come to America she had no intention of taking Tommy, so when we were a week out in mid-ocean the Captain called on mother and asked her if she knew of a man called Tommy Dean. She said yes with much surprise. Tommy had stowed away and when he got hungry he called for mother. Well, she paid his fare



May in wardrobe, circa 1917, in portrait by Bloom of Chicago. Her bobbed hairstyle and large bow, which became her trademark, made her appear younger in the ring. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.



May on My Joe, her favorite horse, with groom Tommy Dean and a large bouquet of flowers on Ringling or Ringling-Barnum, date unknown. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

and when we bought Joe, he became Joe's groom. For the opening, mother made me a gorgeous blue satin dress which I liked very much as blue was my favorite color. It was a wonderful and most successful opening and we became famous overnight. We never looked back from then on, and we were engaged to come back in 1913.

The 1913 Garden season was successful and when we moved to Brooklyn, which used to be the first date under the tent, it was very cold and the lot was usually as hard as cement. It was the month of April when the circus opened under canvas and it was in 1913 that I had my first very bad accident. On the night of our opening in Brooklyn, the tent was packed. There were quite a few celebrities and among them was John Bunny, the famous moving picture comedian. Everything was going beautifully when the boss property man went to straighten out Bird Millman's wire rigging which followed me. I was doing a trick where I slip my foot into a loop attached to the roller collar on the horse and hang head downward into the inside of the ring. The finish horse was going as fast as its legs could carry it and as I was coming up onto the horse's back, the property man threw some rope onto the ring curb and frightened my horse. And I went right over onto the outside of the ring, landing between the ring curb and the horse. I was knocked out immediately and the horse dragged me three times around, then mother managed to reverse Kitty, the [horse] I had broken in for a finish. She was as fast as the wind and as white as snow. She was a pink skin. After being reversed the horse

went another three times around the ring then some of the other riders jumped into the ring to try and stop her but instead she jumped out of the ring and went up the track to the menagerie and was chased back up the track to the middle ring. All the time I was hanging at her side with my foot still in the loop. By this time, the audience was in an uproar and John Bunny included. Nobody could think of a way to get me released from that loop, so mother just walked to the side of Kitty and lifted me up bodily and once my weight was off, my foot slipped out. Fortunately, I was unconscious. The papers that night were screaming with headlines, "May Wirth Killed."

The Accidents in Brooklyn and St. Louis

In 1913 while the show was playing in Brooklyn, May was hurt and the news spread all over the world. Offers of assistance came from a priest in San Francisco, a missionary in China and another priest in Belgium. However, being young and healthy, May healed very quickly and after a month's layoff, she began to practice again for about a week and then was ready to open in St. Louis, Missouri. Everything went off beautifully at St. Louis until the end of the

week. Just before the night show one of the assistants had watered the ring too much. May's finish horse Kitty slipped and May fell off outside the ring and into a hole, hurting her left knee very badly. It never really mended and has been a drawback to her all these years. After this second accident, her mother thought it would be better to



Although circus stars often endorsed products, this picture of May doing a handstand on the hood of a Packard automobile was probably just a gag photo. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.



When the 1913 Barnum and Bailey poster of May was reworked for Ringling Bros. in 1918, her name was spelled correctly, her hair bobbed and the drawing actually looked like her. This iconic image was used for years for numerous other equestriennes and by numerous other lithograph houses besides Strobridge, which created the original design. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

take her away from the show for a rest. For six weeks, May rested at Long Beach, Long Island where she used to go in swimming every day as the doctor said the salt water would be good for her knee. One day May and her sister were showing off to those who were watching them swim and sister threw May a somersault into the waves, getting into deep water and before they knew it they were over their heads in the ocean. They became frightened to death and nearly swallowed the sea, but the next thing she knew was when a big handsome life saver came to her rescue. May and her sister were then cured of showing off at beaches.

It was while they were resting in Long Beach that May's mother booked the act to go in vaudeville on the Keith tour. They had never ridden in a small ring before. The regular size ring is 42 feet and here they had to cut it down to 28 feet which was pretty hard at first, but they got used to it. There was lots of excitement and fun on this tour and it was something new in show business to them. They worked with such stars as Mary Marble, Van and Schrach and many others. After they finished this tour they were booked in London, England at the Olympia which was then being put on by [Heinrich] Hagenbeck and Charles Cochran. It was the most beautiful circus they had ever seen.

The Engagement in London, England

The circus in Olympia was laid out beautifully. Hagenbeck had arranged to have all the wild animals roaming around as if they were in the jungle; just as at his zoo in Hamburg, Germany. It was quite exciting to walk up to a railing and see a lion or tiger sitting on a rock about ten feet high and a water gap about twelve feet wide where polar bears were swimming around having the time of their lives. Olympia is twice as big as Madison Square Garden and when one entered the building they first went through the menagerie then to the circus which was in the center of the building, and walking through you come to an archway through which one saw all kinds of domestic animals. While playing Olympia there was a high school and bareback rider on the bill with the Wirth Family by the name of Baptista Schreiber. Her high school horse was a beautiful thoroughbred from the Danish Royal Stable which had been presented to her in Denmark while playing an engagement there. About a month after the opening at Olympia, May and her family were going down to practice, and as they were passing through the yard to the doors of the Olympia, they saw a white horse dying on a low trolley and immediately they thought it was Joe. But getting closer to it, they saw it was Baptista Schreiber's horse. Of course,



Studio portrait of May and husband Frank Wirth Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, May Wirth album.

there was a good deal of excitement trying to find out what had happened but they later learned that the horse had been poisoned. It was a cruel thing to happen to this lovely horse and whoever it was that disliked Miss Schreiber certainly took a mean way to get revenge. Her horse was the only one who had been tampered with and needless to say everyone was on the watch day and night in case something would happen to their stock.

Queen Alexandra Comes to the Circus

In 1913 Queen Alexandra was Queen Mother of England. She was Danish and so, also, was Miss Schreiber. The management got in touch with Lord Longdale who was head of the R.S.P.C.A. and who was also interested in the circus, to intervene for them to get Queen Alexandra to visit the circus for a benefit to give Miss Schreiber another thoroughbred horse, but this one would not be from the Danish Royal Stables. The Queen came to the matinee and May was headlining in the circus. Special programs were printed for this occasion. The programs were of pure silk in a sort of scroll form. May was about number twelve on the program and Miss Schreiber was number three, so the management asked May if she would exchange places with Miss Schreiber for this one show. Of course, she did not like the idea but being a good sport she did. The Queen had a special box fixed up for her to sit and she was a wonderful audience. She always carried an umbrella and when she enjoyed an act she would smile, nod her head and stomp down with her umbrella.

She never applauded. After the show was over, Lord Longdale came around backstage and asked for May Wirth. He had been sitting with the Queen all through the show and she told him to tell the little Australian rider, whose name she had seen on the silk scroll program, that she enjoyed her performance the best of anything else in the show. May was very elated to think the Queen had singled her out of all the acts in the circus.

During World War I

After playing Olympia for three months, the Wirth Family went to Paris where they played the Alhambra Theatre for one month. It was the first time they had been to Paris and while playing there King George and Queen Mary visited Paris. The French people certainly turned out in great crowds to make their visit pleasant and the Wirths were among the cheering crowds. May's husband [to-be], Frank Wirth, quite an amateur photographer at the time, wanted to get a real close up picture of the King and Queen of England, so he waited for his chance. When the French police moved away for a minute, he stepped off the sidewalk and fixed his camera right in focus of the cortege with the King and Queen. The Queen was sitting on the same side he was taking the picture and she looked right into the camera just as he closed the shutter. The poor Queen thought someone was pointing a gun at her and she jerked herself about off the seat, to avoid the shot which she thought was forthcoming. Frank's arm was then very nearly put out of joint by one of the police, but he got the picture anyway and today it is one of our very treasured possessions. After the Paris engagement, we were booked to go back to England to play a vaudeville tour and in the middle of it World War I broke out. It was very frightening as we were in England all through 1914. Later we went out to Australia to appear in the Wirth Bros. Circus. We went out via America, but mother sent the horses with two of the performers we had in the act via South Africa [with] Tommy Dean as the groom. On the way out they were fired on by torpedo boats twice, but fortunately their boat was missed.

May Returns to America 1915

The Wirth family sailed from England to America on the S.S. *Philadelphia*. The ship was lit up like Broadway at night and the American flag was painted on her sides to show she was an American ship. Just twenty minutes ahead of the S.S. *Philadelphia* was the unfortunate S.S. *Artrarie* who was torpedoed and all lives lost. This was the cue for America to enter the First World War. On board the S.S. *Philadelphia* with the Wirth family were two



Rare indoor photograph of the Wirth family act, probably on a Shrine date in the 1930s. From left, Frank Wirth or Phil St. Leon in kilt to provide comedy, unidentified, Stella Wirth, May Wirth, Rill Wirth with whip, and Tommy Dean holding bareback horse. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.



May was unhappy in 1925 when Charles Ringling decided to drop May's bareback act and have her perform only in the big family riding act. Ringling realized his mistake and by July May's bareback routine was restored. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

German sisters who sat two tables away from the Wirths in the dining salon and when it was announced that the *Artrarie* had been sunk, the two German girls, that night at dinner, started to toast Germany and sing the German National Anthem. For that they were put into the "clink" and stayed there all during the trip to New York. Everyone was scared that this boat would be next but luckily nothing further happened. This was May's experience on her trip back to America before she sailed for Australia again.

May Gets Poor Welcome from Her Own Country

Arriving in Sydney was a wonderful sight after five years being away. Everything and everybody seemed so fine. The Wirth Brothers were building a beautiful new hippodrome in Sydney for the grand opening in the spring. The Wirth Brothers were going to produce a big show like the New York Hippodrome used to do. They imported a big producer from England by the name of Ernest Dural. The hippodrome had a very big stage and a sinking ring to put on water shows. As the war was on, Dural thought he would put on a war show. It was called "Kulture," and it was a beautiful show. This came on after the circus performance. Besides bringing May out to headline the circus, the Wirths also brought out a seal act that had been in the Barnum and Bailey Circus. They were the Huling brothers and they were very good. They did the whole seal number in the show. My husband booked Frank Huling out with the Wirth show the same time that May was there. The Wirths gave May a big buildup in the papers and fanfare of every kind about their own

little May coming back after five years in America and England. The opening went off beautifully. May rode like she never rode before in her life, wanting to show her countrymen and women what they had produced for the world in a circus riding star; however, when the papers came out the following day, oh boy, what a let-down. The press gave "Kulture" good notices and the new acts great praise, especially the Frank Huling performing seals. The Australian public simply went crazy over these seals as well as [did] New Zealand and Tasmania. All that was said of May was that "our little May" had returned and she was better than ever. To say the least, her heart was broken. It would have been better if she had taken another name and been publicized as an American import.

May Returns to America

In the summer of 1916, we had a cable from Charles Ringling, offering May and the Wirths an engagement for the season of 1917. May nearly jumped over the moon she was so happy to be going back to America where she was appreciated and made a fuss of. World War I was still on, so we had to put in for our sailing right away, as there were not many civilians travelling then. It meant us not staying the full twelve months with our Uncles' circus, but who cared, least of all May. When we came back to Australia my sister Stella got acquainted with her girlhood sweetheart again; his name was Phil St. Leon. The Wirths and St. Leons were long standing friends. Phil's father was Stella's father's best man at his wedding. Young Phil was put to take a nap on the bed in mother's room,

while she was being dressed for her wedding. The wedding veil was lying on the bed, and while they were talking and not paying attention to Phil, he rolled over on mother's veil and what he did to the veil, enough said. So when Stella arrived, it seemed destined for these two to be married. When we were leaving to come back to the States, the riding comedian we had in the act did not want to come to America, so they said let's see if Phil would like to come along. Phil and his sister and brothers owned and ran a small circus. So May said I am going to ask Phil to join us. The result, Phil not only joined the act but married Stella in December of 1917 and have lived happily ever since.

We arrived in San Francisco two months ahead of the opening in the Ringling show. So we stayed in San Francisco two weeks and Frank, May's husband, went to the Pantages office to get us five weeks work [in vaudeville] before going on to Chicago to open with the Ringling Bros. Circus. We arrived in Chicago about two weeks before the opening. When the show pulled in from Baraboo, Wisconsin, we were right at the front door of the Coliseum and there we met our new boss, and what a boss. Charles Ringling will go down in circus history as one of the finest and most thoughtful circus proprietors in America. Mr. Charles, as his performers called him, had a different opening for me. It was a line up of 16 ladies, and at the finish of my act, the finish horse was run in front of the ring on which I mounted and the groom ran him clear around the hippodrome track. As Mr. Charles said, it gave the audience at the ends a chance to get a close glance of May. Going back to the Barnum and Bailey Circus, there was a riding act by the name of Orrin Davenport, one of America's best riders; he was very wonderful to me. He was doing a very difficult trick called the back across, meaning turning a somersault from one horse to another, running tandem and during the season of 1912 I asked Orrin if it would be possible for a woman to learn that trick. He paid me a very nice compliment by saying, why yes, May Wirth could. And as of years gone by I was butting into someone else's act by asking Orrin if he would teach me the back across. And, if you please, on his own horses, which is something riders do not care about doing. And this trick was the big thing in my act when I returned to Australia.

So on my return to America, I had asked John Cooke, my tutor, to teach me the jump up from the ground with my feet encased in market baskets, and when I opened with the Ringling show, it was something new for Mr. Charles to boast about, as there was not another woman rider able to do this trick. I think Mr. Charles was pretty proud of me for that. During the time I was in the Barnum show and Orrin Davenport had taught me the back across, Mr. John Ringling came to me and asked would I do the back across as the opposition party was in, and I asked who, and he said, "why my brother Charlie." It seemed rather funny to me at the time, but I appreciated that remark. When in the opening of the Coliseum, Mr. Charles said to me, "May, my brother is sitting in the front box, let's show him we have something he's never seen a girl do

before." And boy I rode like a demon, finishing my act with the jump from the ground with my feet encased in market baskets. By that time Mr. John's famous cigar was chewed right to the end, and Mr. Charles was smiling from ear to ear while I stood in the middle ring receiving the most beautiful bouquets; one of Easter Lilies from Mrs. Charles Ringling and one of gorgeous American Beauty roses from Robert Ringling. I had many more, but those two stood out. I'm a lover of flowers; I think I was the happiest girl in the world that night. And it really was the opening performance. The performers had to be in their full performing dress and with the keen eye of the press on you it was quite nerve-wracking. Saturday, the real opening with the audience in was nothing.

My Years with the Greatest Circus in the World

After my opening with the Ringling Brothers in 1917, it was one great event every year, and playing vaudeville in the winter. Or maybe we wanted a change and would go over to Europe. It was a thrill every time we would go over, and we were a dumb act, meaning we did not talk. We did not have to learn the different languages of the many countries we went to, and we always played in theatres and would stay a month in each city, which made it very nice. In the summer of 1925, we opened in the new Madison Square Garden, and Mr. Charles came to us and wanted us to put our two acts into one big one. Why he did that I will never know. Anyway in the middle of the summer just before we were to play Chicago, Mr. Charles came to me and asked if I would do my single act again, after all I was billed as headliner of the show and was in the family which covered up my good work. The family had to do a regular routined act. And when I was put into it, everything looked wrong. In vaudeville it was different because we routined the act so as my work was featured. In the circus, Phil featured in the comedy riding and May starred in her own act, and when Mr. Charles put the two acts together May's heart was broken, but the boss wanted it that way and that's how it went on until we got north within two weeks of playing Chicago. Then Mr. Charles

came to ask me if I wouldn't rather go back into my own act. It was a little late in the season to start thinking about that, and believe me Mr. Charles had to put on some of his best persuading charm to get me to do my single act again.

May Wirth was born on June 6, 1894 in Bundaberg, Australia. In 1919, she married Frank White who adopted the Wirth name. She continued as a performer until 1937, finally retiring to Sarasota, Florida, where she made her home until her death at the age of 84 on October 18, 1978. Fred Bradna, long time Ringling-Barnum equestrian director, wrote of her: "There is no doubt that May Wirth was the greatest woman bareback rider the world has ever seen. She did with ease things that few men and no woman could do—the forward somersault, the back, backward (as James Robinson did it, with his back toward the horse's head), and she could somersault from one horse to another. More than that, the Australian beauty was a showman of the first order. Her like will never be seen again." BW



Studio portrait of May Wirth after her retirement as a performer in 1937. Courtesy John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

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